AN ARMENIAN SKETCHBOOK

VASILY GROSSMAN

INTRODUCTION BY
ROBERT CHANDLER
AND YURY BIT-YUNAN

VASILY SEMYONOVICH GROSSMAN was born on December 12, 1905, in Berdichev, a Ukrainian town that was home to one of Europe's largest Jewish communities. In 1934 he published both "In the Town of Berdichev"—a short story that won the admiration of such diverse writers as Maksim Gorky, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Isaak Babel—and a novel, *Glyukauf*, about the life of the Donbass miners. During the Second World War, Grossman worked as a reporter for the army newspaper *Red Star*, covering nearly all of the most important battles from the defense of Moscow to the fall of Berlin. His vivid yet sober "The Hell of Treblinka" (late 1944), one of the first articles in any language about a Nazi death camp, was translated and used as testimony in the Nuremberg trials. His novel *For a Just Cause* (originally titled *Stalingrad*) was published to great acclaim in 1952 and then fiercely attacked. A new wave of purges—directed against the Jews—was about to begin; but for Stalin's death, in March 1953, Grossman would almost certainly have been arrested himself. During the next few years Grossman, while enjoying public success, worked on his two masterpieces, neither of which was to be published in Russia until the late 1980s: *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows*. The KGB confiscated the manuscript of *Life and Fate* in February 1961. Grossman was able, however, to continue working on *Everything Flows*, a novel even more critical of Soviet society than *Life and Fate*, until his last days in the hospital. He died on September 14, 1964, on the eve of the twenty-third anniversary of the massacre of the Jews of Berdichev in which his mother had died.

ROBERT CHANDLER is the author of *Alexander Pushkin* and the editor of two anthologies for Penguin Classics: *Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida* and *Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov*. His translations of Sappho and Guillaume Apollinaire are published in the Everyman's Poetry series. His translations from Russian include Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate, Everything Flows*, and *The Road* (all published by NYRB Classics); Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*; and Aleksander Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter*. Together with Olga Meerson and his wife, Elizabeth, he has translated a number of works by Andrey Platonov. One of these, *Soul*, won the 2004 AATSEEL (American Association of Teachers of Slavonic and East European Languages) Prize. His translation of Hamid Ismailov's *The Railway* won the AATSEEL Prize for 2007 and received a special commendation from the judges of the 2007 Rossica Translation Prize.

ELIZABETH CHANDLER is a co-translator, with her husband, of Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter*; of Vasily Grossman's *Everything Flows* and *The Road*; and of several volumes of Andrey Platonov: *The Return, The Portable Platonov, Happy Moscow*, and *Soul*.

YURY BIT-YUNAN was born in Bryansk, in western Russia. He graduated from the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow, and completed his doctorate on the work of Vasily Grossman. At present he is lecturing on literary criticism at the the Russian State University for the Humanities while continuing to research Grossman's life and work.

AN ARMENIAN SKETCHBOOK

VASILY GROSSMAN

Translated from the Russian by

ROBERT and ELIZABETH CHANDLER

With an introduction and notes by

ROBERT CHANDLER and YURY BIT-YUNAN

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
nyrb
New York

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS
435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014
www.nyrb.com

Copyright © by E.V. Korotkova-Grossman and F.B. Guber
Translation and notes copyright © 2013 by Robert Chandler
All rights reserved.

An Armenian Sketchbook is translated from the text of *Dobro vam* published in Vasily Grossman, *Sobranie sochinenii v 4-h tomakh* (Moscow: Agraf, 1998).

Cover image: Vasily Grossman in Armenia, with ruins of the Hellenistic temple of Garni in the background
Cover design: Katy Homans

The Library of Congress has cataloged the earlier printing as follows:
Grossman, Vasilii, 1905–1964.
[Dobro vam. English]
An Armenian sketchbook / by Vasily Grossman ; translated by Robert and
Elizabeth Chandler ; with an introduction and notes by Robert Chandler and
Yury Bit-Yunan.
pages ; cm. — (New York Review Books classics)
ISBN 978-1-59017-618-4 (alkaline paper)
1. Grossman, Vasilii Semenovich—Travel—Armenia (Republic) 2. Armenia (Republic)—Description and travel. I. Chandler, Robert, 1953–, translator, writer of added commentary. II. Chandler, Elizabeth, 1947–, translator. III. Bit-Yunan, Yury, writer of added commentary. IV. Title. V. Series: New York Review Books classics.
PG3476.G7D613 2013
891.73'42—dc23
2012039197

eISBN 978-1-59017-635-1
v1.0

For a complete list of books in the NYRB Classics series, visit www.nyrb.com or write to:
Catalog Requests, NYRB, 435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

CONTENTS

Biographical Notes
Title page
Copyright and More Information
Introduction

AN ARMENIAN SKETCHBOOK

An Armenian Picture Album
Acknowledgments
Notes
Further Reading

Introduction

AN ARMENIAN SKETCHBOOK, written in early 1962, two years before Vasily Grossman's death in September 1964, is unlike anything else Grossman wrote. It is deeply personal and has an air of spontaneity; Grossman seems simply to be chatting to the reader about his immediate impressions of Armenia—its people, its mountains, its ancient churches—and digressing, almost at random, onto subjects that range from the problem of nationalism to his views on art and even his difficulties with his bladder and bowels.

The underlying cause of these physical problems was that Grossman was in the early stages of cancer, soon to be diagnosed in one of his kidneys. Just as *Everything Flows*, which he began in the mid-1950s but continued to expand and revise during his last years, is Grossman's political testament, so *An Armenian Sketchbook* is his personal testament, a discussion of the values he holds dearest—in art and in life. It seems likely that, at some level, Grossman sensed he did not have long to live.

There are relatively few memoirs of Grossman, and there is no other work, by Grossman or anyone else, that gives us so clear a sense of the man he was. Three qualities stand out: an unusual openness to other people, and especially to those who are not members of the Soviet elite; a clearheaded skepticism, directed sometimes towards others but more often towards himself; and a quiet, modest persistence. Grossman never deliberately sets out to be original, either with regard to literary style or with regard to content; his originality emerges only gradually, as he doggedly continues to see with his own eyes and to think his own thoughts. And the remarkable coherence of these thoughts emerges equally gradually; the different threads of this apparently casual memoir are deftly interwoven.

Russian writers, unable to travel freely outside the Russian (or Soviet) Empire, have often been attracted to the Caucasus, and they have left us a number of fine travel sketches: Alexander Pushkin's *Journey to Erzurum* and Osip Mandelstam's *Journey to Armenia* are the two most remarkable.[1] Grossman, however, does not mention either of these works; the inspiration for *An Armenian Sketchbook* came not from literature but from the circumstances of his life.

In October 1960, Grossman had submitted the manuscript of *Life and Fate* to the editors of a Soviet literary journal. It was the height of Khrushchev's "thaw" and Grossman seems genuinely to have believed that *Life and Fate* could be published in the Soviet Union, even though a central theme of the novel is that Nazism and Stalinism are mirror images of each other. In February 1961, three KGB officers came to Grossman's apartment and confiscated the typescript and everything bearing any relation to it, even carbon paper and typewriter ribbons. The Soviet authorities were evidently determined not to repeat the mistake they had made three years earlier with Boris Pasternak; by persecuting Pasternak when he was awarded the Nobel Prize after the publication of *Doctor Zhivago*, they succeeded only in bringing him unprecedented international attention. They dealt with Grossman more shrewdly; rather than making a martyr of him, they simply took his book away.

Grossman did not know that his work would survive, let alone be published. According to his friend Semyon Lipkin, "Grossman aged before our eyes. His curly hair turned grayer and a bald patch appeared. His asthma. . .returned. His walk became a shuffle."[2] And the writer Boris Yampolsky reports Grossman himself as saying, "They strangled me in a dark corner."[3]

Later that year Grossman agreed to rewrite a clumsy literal translation of a long Armenian war

novel—a task that would entail spending two months in Armenia. He evidently felt that he needed the money: After completing the work, he wrote to his wife, "I'm glad that I have been able to escape from material difficulties, that I haven't got into debt, that I haven't had to borrow money from well-wishers."[4] He may also simply have wanted to get away from Moscow; his difficulties at this time included not only the "arrest" of his novel but also the near breakdown of his marriage. He may have hoped that the combination of disciplined work and a trip to somewhere exotic would do him good.

It needs to be said, however, that this story is more complicated than is immediately apparent and has yet to be fully researched. No previous scholar or memoirist has mentioned that an entirely competent Russian translation—by a different translator, Arus Tadeosyan—of an earlier, shorter version of this novel, Hrachya Kochar's *The Children of the Large House*, had been published in 1955 (by Sovetsky pisatel′) and again in 1956 (by Voenizdat), only five years before Grossman's visit to Armenia. Kochar may have hoped that a new version, by someone important, would bring more attention to his novel, but it is surprising that neither Lipkin nor Grossman appear ever to have mentioned the earlier version. Grossman would certainly have known about it; Sovetsky pisatel′ and Voenizdat were two of the most important Soviet publishers. Both were based in Moscow, and both had brought out editions of Grossman's first novel about Stalingrad, *For a Just Cause*.

The most plausible explanation of the decision by the Soviet literary authorities to commission a new translation of Kochar's novel is that it was an attempt to buy Grossman off, to compensate him—at least in financial terms—for the non-publication of *Life and Fate*, and so lessen the danger of his contacting foreign journalists or sending manuscripts abroad. According to Kochar's daughter Meri, it was Vardkes Tevekelyan, the chairman of the very important Literary Fund, who first introduced Grossman to her father.[5] Tevekelyan may simply have been wishing to do Grossman a favor, or he may have been acting under instructions from some still-higher authority.

Grossman began work (in both his letters and his memoir he follows the standard Soviet practice of referring to the work of improving a literal version not as "editing" but as "translation") some time in the summer, and by mid-October he was halfway through the novel. On October 13, he wrote, "Today I've finished the first volume—690 pages! I'm a translator! Still, this work really is good for me—the rhythm, the systematic nature of it, the hours I devote to it every day—all this is calming and strengthening."[6] In early November, he traveled to Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, in order to work more closely both with the literal translator, Hasmik Taronyan, whom he refers to in his memoir as Hortensia, and the author, Hrachya Kochar, whom he calls Martirosyan. In mid-December, he wrote to Lipkin:

> I've finished with the awful, illiterate literal version. I've reached the final page, the 1,420th. Now I'll be reading through and revising the text as it comes back from the typists. I've read through 100 pages already. Compared with working on the literal version, this is like being on the staff of *Red Army Soldier* after being with Gorokhov's men in Stalingrad in October 1942. It's a rest for the soul. . . . I've already got used to the author's almost sleepy indifference to the way an elderly gentleman is working on his book so diligently that by evening his face and brow are covered in purple blotches. Two weeks ago I found this astonishing, but what would most astonish me now would be to hear the words "Thank you!"[7]

A letter written two weeks later, on December 30, tells us more about Grossman's difficulties with the author of the novel:

> I'm so exhausted that, apart from nervous upset and a senseless desire to weep, I feel nothing at all. It's as if everything's come loose inside me. There have been sharp words between me and my client. He is no fool; he understands that I have helped him, but at the same time he can't help hating me—like a wild animal that has fallen into the clutches of Doctor Moreau. And Doctor Moreau truly has cut him up and crumpled him a great deal and taken him several steps up the ladder of literary evolution. But he, of course, finds this painful: "Where's my hair? Why's my tail been chopped off?" And, at the same time, he's pleased.[8]

This brief vignette of Kochar is memorably witty, but Kochar's mixed feelings are understandable. No one has yet carried out a detailed comparison of Grossman's "translation" with the Armenian original, but it seems likely that Grossman put a great deal of himself into the final Russian version. His version ends with a soldier telling a young woman by the name of Anik that the Germans are gone. Anik, who is pregnant, feels her child moving inside her; hearing the sound of distant artillery, she momentarily imagines that they are firing a salute in honor of this child. It would be hard to imagine a more "Grossman-like" ending; the tension between motherhood and human destructiveness is a central theme throughout his work. It seems that Grossman may have been attempting to compensate himself for the "arrest" of *Life and Fate*; unable to publish his own novel about the Second World War, he may have seized the opportunity to rewrite someone else's.

This same letter of December 30 also includes a first mention of the memoir that Grossman titled *Dobro vam* (literally "Good to You") and that we have titled *An Armenian Sketchbook*.[9] Grossman continues, "Yesterday I finished this bone-breaking work—and today I've begun writing, noting down my Armenian impressions. I'm like George Sand, who finished a novel at four in the morning and, without going to bed, began a second one there and then. Though there is, admittedly, a difference—*she* was being published. My own behavior, in contrast, is hard to understand. Why should *I* be in such a hurry?"[10] Two weeks later, in a letter written from Sukhumi, on the Black Sea, where he stopped on his way back to Moscow, Grossman referred again to his need to work: "For me, this New Year has begun, like all my life: well and happily, and bitterly and anxiously, confusedly, with joy in my heart, and with the desire to work—a desire as irrational as the life instinct, as senseless and invincible."[11] It seems likely that an additional reason for Grossman's eagerness to begin work on the memoir was the desire to be writing in his own voice again. In a letter to his wife, he wrote, "I dream of finishing work and resting in silence. Once again I'll be myself—not a translator." And in another letter he wrote, "But, you know, I really do find all this translation work very hard. It demands a great deal of strength, and it is emotionally difficult. I like to be myself, however difficult and complicated this may be. And this need to be myself only gets stronger over the years. And I respect it; I shan't become a translator."[12] The self-revelation of *An Armenian Sketchbook* seems, at least in part, to have been a reaction to the self-effacement required of a translator—even of a translator who treats his original text with considerable freedom.

After completing his Armenian memoir in the first half of 1962, Grossman submitted it to the journal *Novy Mir*. The editor, Aleksandr Tvardovsky, accepted it. The censor, however, insisted on the omission of around twenty lines about anti-Semitism from the penultimate page.[13] By then Grossman had come to feel deeply ashamed of the many compromises he had made in the course of his life and he refused to agree to this demand. As a result, *Dobro vam* was not published until 1965, eight months after Grossman's death—and then only with the omission of whole chapters.[14]

The complete text was published in November 1988 in the journal *Znamya*. It is this text, prepared

from the manuscript by Grossman's daughter, Yekaterina Korotkova, and republished in Russia several times, that we have used for the present translation. It should be noted, however, that we cannot be certain that it reflects Grossman's final wishes in every detail. We cannot take it for granted that every passage missing from the 1965 version was omitted at the insistence of an editor or censor; Tvardovsky was a skilled editor and, for all we know, Grossman may have willingly agreed to some of the cuts he suggested.

The passages omitted from the 1965 version (and also from two editions in 1967) fall into four main categories. There are the passages about Stalin—for example, the whole of the second chapter—which might have been acceptable in 1962, while Khrushchev was still in power, but which were certainly no longer acceptable three years later, after Khrushchev had been deposed. There are the long discussions of nationalism; chapter four, for example, was also entirely deleted—a useful reminder to the modern reader that Grossman's thoughts about nationalism were, at the time, controversial. There are passages that might have offended particular individuals—for example, some of the more ironic mentions of "Martirosyan" and "Hortensia."[15] Lastly, some of the passages about Grossman's physical problems are greatly abridged. Until recently, Russian writers have tended to shy away from descriptions of physiological matters. In addressing such potentially humiliating problems, Grossman was being characteristically bold.[16]

Grossman's own title for this memoir, *Dobro vam*, is a strange but effective phrase. The literal meaning, as I have said, is "Good to you." This is not a Russian idiom but a literal, unidiomatic translation of a standard Armenian greeting, *Barev dzez*. The phrase works better in Russian than in English, because the Russian *dobro* is clearly a noun, whereas the English "good" could be either a noun or an adjective. For this and other reasons, it seemed best to give this English translation a different and more explanatory title. Grossman's own title, however, was clearly important to him, and in the last lines of this memoir he returns to the Armenian greeting that inspired it: *Barev dzez*—"All good to you, Armenians and non-Armenians!" Since Grossman put such emphasis here on the word "good," since the nature of true goodness is one of his central themes, and since, at least in retrospect, his memoir has the air of a farewell gift or blessing, it seems appropriate to end this introduction with a moving quotation from an article by Lev Slavin, a Russian writer who visited Armenia eight years after Grossman:

> In Tsakhkadzor I went to the house where Vasily Semyonovich had stayed and worked eight years before. A white two-story building like many other houses of recreation built in the 1930s. This was the small House of Creativity of the Armenian Writers' Union. Outside on the veranda was a battered billiard table, the one Grossman had played on. The rooms were closed. Everything bore an imprint of neglect and sorrow. I looked attentively at everything round about, trying to look through Grossman's eyes. Yes, I tried for a moment to adopt his slightly surprised, slightly amused gaze. A good-natured gaze. It was this good nature, probably, that came hardest to me. There had, apparently, been an old man who kept talking to Grossman in Armenian. When someone told him that Grossman did not understand, he got angry and said, "No, it's impossible that a man with such good and kind eyes doesn't understand Armenian."[17]

—YURY BIT-YUNAN
and ROBERT CHANDLER
September 2012

AN ARMENIAN SKETCHBOOK

1

I FIRST glimpsed Armenia from the train, early in the morning: greenish-gray rock—not mountains or crags but scree, flat deposits of stone, fields of stone. A mountain had died, its skeleton had been scattered over the ground. Time had aged the mountain; time had killed the mountain—and here lay the mountain's bones.

To one side of the railway stretched endless barbed wire, several lines deep. It took me a while to realize that we were following the Turkish border. I saw a little white house, and beside it, a little donkey—not one of our own donkeys but a Turkish donkey. There were no people anywhere. The Turkish soldiers must have all been asleep.

Armenian village houses are low, flat-roofed rectangles built out of large slabs of gray stone. There is no greenery; the houses are surrounded not by trees and flowers but by dense scatterings of gray stone. The houses seem not to have been built by human hands. Sometimes a gray stone comes to life and begins to move. A sheep. The sheep too must have been born from stone; probably they eat powdered stone and drink the dust of stone. There is no grass anywhere, no water, nothing but flat, stony steppe—nothing but large, jagged gray, greenish, or black stones.

The peasants are wearing the uniform of all Soviet working folk: thick wadded jackets, gray or black. The men are like the stones they live among; their faces are dark both from a natural swarthiness and from being unshaven. Many are wearing long white woolen socks, pulled up over their trousers. The women wear gray scarves wound around their heads, covering their mouths and their foreheads down to their eyes. Even these scarves are the color of stone.

Then I see a couple of women in bright-red dresses, in red blouses, red waistcoats, red sashes, and red head scarves. Every part of their dress is a different red, crying out piercingly in its own red voice. These are Kurds—wives to men who have been breeding cattle for thousands of years. Perhaps this is their red mutiny against gray centuries amid gray stone.

A young man in the compartment with me keeps comparing the heavenly fertility of Georgia with the stones of Armenia. He is full of criticisms—if the conversation turns to the seven-kilometer railway tunnel built straight through the basalt, he says, "*That* was built back in the reign of Nicholas II." He tells me about opportunities for buying dollars or imperial gold coins; he tells me the black-market exchange rate. It seems he really envies more serious wheeler-dealers.

Later the young man tells me about a craftsman who fashions metal wreaths adorned with metal leaves. Apparently even the most modest of Yerevan funerals is attended by two or three hundred people—and there are usually almost as many wreaths as people; this creator of funeral wreaths has become rich. The young man treats me to a pomegranate. He bought it in Moscow. But the journey from Moscow to Yerevan is a long and huge country in its own right. When we boarded the train at the Kursk station, my fellow traveler was clean-shaven; by the time we reached Yerevan his face was covered with black beard.

2

ON A HILL above Yerevan stands a statue of Stalin. No matter where you are in the city, you can clearly see the titanic bronze marshal. If a cosmonaut from a far-off planet were to see this bronze giant towering over the capital of Armenia, he would understand at once that it is a monument to a great and terrible ruler.

Stalin wears a long bronze greatcoat, and he has a forage cap on his head. One of his bronze hands is tucked beneath the lapel of his greatcoat. He strides along, and his stride is slow, smooth, and weighty. It is the stride of a master, a ruler of the world; he is in no hurry. Two very different forces come together in him, and this is strange and troubling. He is the expression of a power so vast that it can belong only to God; and he is also the expression of a coarse, earthly power, the power of a soldier or government official.

This magnificent god in a greatcoat is, of course, the work of Merkurov.[1]

It may be his best work. It may even be the finest monument of our time. It is a monument to our epoch—a monument to the epoch of Stalin. Stalin's head seems to touch the clouds. The statue itself is seventeen meters high; together with the building on whose roof it stands, it is seventy-eight meters. When the monument was being assembled and parts of the vast bronze body were still lying on the ground, workers could walk through Stalin's hollow leg without bowing their heads.

This monument towers over Yerevan and the whole of Armenia. It towers over Russia, over the Ukraine, over the Black and the Caspian seas, over the Arctic Ocean, over the forests of eastern Siberia, over the sands of Kazakhstan. Stalin and the state are one and the same.

This monument was erected in 1951. Scientists, poets, distinguished shepherds, vanguard workers, students, schoolchildren, and Old Bolsheviks all gathered at the foot of the bronze giant. The orators, naturally, gave speeches about the greatest, wisest, most brilliant, most dearly loved of all great, wise, brilliant, and dearly loved fathers and teachers. Every head bowed before the master, the leader, the builder of the Soviet state. Stalin's state was the expression of Stalin's character. And Stalin's character was the expression of the state he had built.

I arrived in Yerevan at the time of the Twenty-second Party Congress,[2] when the city's most beautiful street, a broad straight street lined on either side with plane trees and lit by a central row of streetlamps, was renamed; I arrived when it was decided that Stalin Prospect should become Lenin Prospect.

My Armenian companions, one of whom had been among the distinguished figures entrusted many years before with the task of unveiling the statue of Stalin, seemed very uneasy when I praised the titanic monument.

Some expressed themselves elegantly: "Let the metal used to construct this monument return to its noble primordial condition."

Others abused Stalin—not so much for the terrible crimes and mass killings of 1937 as for being a nobody. They called him an ignoramus, a boaster, an upstart.

My attempts to say a word about Stalin's role in the creation of the Soviet state were in vain. My companions would not concede that he had played even the slightest role in the construction of heavy industry, in the conduct of the war, in the creation of the Soviet state apparatus: Everything had been achieved regardless of him, in spite of him. Their lack of objectivity was so glaring that I felt an involuntary urge to stand up for Stalin. This absolute lack of objectivity might be said to resemble

nothing so much as the lack of objectivity these same people had shown during Stalin's life, when they had been so supremely worshipful of his mind and strength of will, of his foresight and genius. Their hysterical worship of Stalin and their total and unconditional rejection of him sprang from the same soil.

Listening to these people in Yerevan, I recognized traits that I had already encountered in Russians. Kindness, reason, and nobility are clearly not the only qualities to be found all over the world. Meanness and cunning are no less widespread. They are to be found in the north and the south, among the fair-haired, the dark-haired, among every nation, race, and tribe.

On the evening of November 7, 1961, together with two of my Yerevan acquaintances, I climbed the hill on which stood the statue of Stalin. The sun was going down. We sat in a small restaurant, looking at the pink snows of Mount Ararat. We talked about Stalin. We were eating some very salty and badly cooked fish—which may have made my companions all the more acrimonious.

Darkness fell; cannons began firing a salute in honor of the forty-fourth anniversary of the Revolution. My companions went on talking; again and again I heard the words "Soso"[3] and "*mama dzoglu*," which means "son of a bitch."

I went up to the statue and saw an astonishing sight. Dozens of cannons formed a half circle around the base of the monument. With each salvo, long tongues of flame lit up the surrounding mountains and the titanic figure of Stalin would emerge from the darkness. Bright incandescent smoke and flame swirled around the bronze feet of the Master. It was as if, for one last time, the Generalissimo were commanding his artillery. Again and again, fire and thunder split open the darkness; hundreds of soldiers were working away. Silence and darkness would return. Once again the command would be given and the terrible bronze god in a greatcoat would step out from the mountain darkness. No, no, it was impossible not to give this figure his due—this instigator of countless inhuman crimes was also the leader, the merciless builder of a great and terrible state.

He could not simply be dismissed as a *mama dzoglu*. "Son of a bitch" was no more appropriate a title than "Father and Friend of the Peoples of the Earth."

Officials from the Yerevan City Party Committee told me that, at a general meeting of collective farmers in a village in the Ararat valley, in response to a proposal to take down the statue of Stalin, the peasants had said, "The state collected a hundred thousand rubles from us in order to erect this statue. Now the state wants to destroy it. By all means, go ahead and destroy it—but give us back our hundred thousand rubles." One old man had proposed removing the statue and burying it intact. "Who knows? If some new lot end up in power, the statue may come in handy. Then we won't need to fork out a second time."

How tragic this is. The affirmation of the power of the Stalinist state comes in the form of a condemnation, by its own leaders, of Stalin himself. And the spirit of rebellion takes the form of the affirmation of Stalin—one of the most terrible murderers in all human history.[4]

At seven o'clock in the evening, in the quiet mountain village of Tsakhkadzor, sixty kilometers from Yerevan, there is not a soul to be seen. But Tsakhkadzor has its own madman: seventy-five-year-old Andreas. People say he lost his mind during the genocide[5]—members of his own family were murdered in front of his eyes. People say that, when he was young, Andreas served in the tsarist army, under the command of Andranik Pasha—the Armenian partisan leader and officer in the Russian army, worshipped by the Armenian peasantry, who died not long ago in the United States.[6] Andreas's wife—a martyr who lived her whole life with a madman—died only a year ago. While she was alive Andreas had regularly beaten her, but when she died he refused to let her be buried. He

kept on embracing her, kissing her, trying to sit his dear dead friend at the table, to give her something to eat. Nobody dared say anything to the old madman who refused to believe that his wife was dead.

Now Andreas lives alone in a small stone house. He has two ewes who feel nothing but trustful love for him, seeing nothing the least strange about his madness, his singing during the night, and his fits of fury and despair.

Whenever anyone mentions Andranik Pasha, Andreas weeps. Probably, no one since Shakespeare's time could better have played the role of mad old Lear. Of average height, broad-shouldered, and quite stout, probably suffering from edema, wearing a warm, rather ragged peasant jacket, with a sheepskin hat on his head and a large, gnarled staff in his hand, Andreas wanders about the steep little streets of Tsakhkadzor. His gait is sad and magnificent; there is something funereal about it. His head is large and gray, and white curls spill out from under his hat. As for his face, it would make Rembrandt lay down his brush and say, "There's nothing left for me to do. Nature's done it all already." And it's true—you could capture his face best with a humble camera. Andreas has a leonine forehead, heavy overhanging brows, deep lines around his mouth, a large nose, the jowls of Field Marshal Hindenburg, and bulging yellowy-gray eyes that are at once watery and inflamed. These eyes contain kindness and exhaustion, indomitable rage and terrible anguish, deep thought and crazed fury.

The inhabitants of Tsakhkadzor feel sorry for Andreas. The sly and thrifty Karapet-aga,[7] who once lived in Syria and who gave up a tavern in Aleppo for a restaurant-cum-bar in Tsakhkadzor, is always ready to give him something to eat. He speaks respectfully to him, and Andreas, for all his pride and general suspiciousness, is never offended by Karapet's generosity; he trustingly enjoys his hot *khash*—a monstrously calorific broth made from calves' feet with garlic. Sometimes Karapet-aga brings Andreas a small glass of brandy. Andreas drinks it, sings a war song about Andranik Pasha, and weeps.

Khachik, the shepherd, grazes Andreas's two sheep in the mountains without asking for payment. Siranush, a neighbor, sometimes brings around some dung, so she can light the old man's stove for him and heat his little stone cell.

Once I saw Andreas in a real fury. He was cursing in Armenian, bringing his Armenian curses to an incandescent heat over the dirty flame of ordinary Russian swearwords. Soon afterwards, I found out what had happened. During the night, on instructions from the Party committee, the gilt plaster statue of Stalin had been removed from the village square. Seeing this, Andreas had shaken his staff in the air. He had attacked drivers; he had attacked children; he had attacked Karapet-aga; he had attacked students from Yerevan who had come to the village to ski.

For Andreas, Stalin was the man who had defeated the Germans. And the Germans were the Turks' allies. It followed that the statue of Stalin had been destroyed by Turkish agents. And the Turks had killed Armenian women and children. The Turks had executed Armenian old men. They had done away with peaceful and entirely innocent people: peasants, workers, and craftsmen. They had killed writers, scholars, and singers. The Turks had killed Andreas's family; they had destroyed his home and killed his brother. The Turks had killed Armenian merchants and Armenian beggars; they had tried to kill the Armenian nation. The great Russian general Andranik Pasha had fought against the Turks. And the commander in chief of the Russian army that had vanquished the Turks' mighty allies was Stalin.

Everyone in the village was amused by Andreas's rage; he had confused two different wars—the First World War and the Second. The crazed old man demanded that the gilt statue of Stalin be returned to the main square—it was, after all, Stalin who had routed the Germans, who had defeated Hitler. Everyone laughed at the old man: He was insane, whereas the people around him were not.

3

SURPRISINGLY, many Armenians have blond hair and gray or blue eyes. I saw fair-haired children in the village. I saw a sweet little four-year-old girl called Ruzana who had pale blue eyes and golden hair. I saw faces with a classic, antique beauty, perfect ovals, with small straight noses and pale-blue almond-shaped eyes. I saw people with high cheekbones, flattened noses, and slightly slanting eyes; I saw people with elongated, sharp faces and huge, sharp, hooked noses; I saw people whose hair was so black as to be almost blue, with eyes like coals; I saw the thin lips of Jesuits and the thick protuberant lips of Africans.

Nevertheless, there is such a thing as a national type.

And it is hard to say which is the more surprising: this diversity or the stubborn persistence of the national type.

The diversity, I suppose, reflects thousands of years of raids and invasions, of people being taken captive, of commercial and cultural encounters. Here we can see all the other people with whom the Armenians came into contact: Assyrians and Babylonians; the ancient Greeks; Persians, Turks, and Slavs; the fearsome Mongols. The Armenians are an ancient nation, with thousands of years of culture and history. They have lived through many wars. They are a traveling nation, a nation that has borne the yoke of the invader for many centuries, a nation that has more than once struggled to win its freedom only to fall back again into slavery. Perhaps this is the reason for all the flattened Mongolian noses, the Assyrian jet-black hair, the pale-blue Greek eyes,[8] and coal-black Persian eyes.

Interestingly, all this diversity—fair and dark hair, pale-blue and black eyes, and so on—is particularly evident in the countryside, in villages whose way of life is inward-looking and patriarchal. Here, at least, it cannot be the reflection of any recent events. The mirror that shows us the face of contemporary Armenia has been polished in the depth of time.

The same can be said of Russian faces and—still more—of Jewish faces. There is certainly nothing uniform about Russian faces. There are Russians with gray or light-blue eyes, with snub noses and flaxen hair; there are Russians with hooked noses, so-called "Gypsies," with southern, black eyes and pitch-black curls; and there are Russians with high cheekbones, flattened noses, and narrow Mongol eyes. And as for the Jews! Black-haired, hook-nosed, snub-nosed, swarthy, blue-eyed, fair-haired. . . . Faces that look Asian, African, Spanish, German, Slav. . . .

The longer a nation's history, the more wars, invasions, wanderings, and periods of captivity it has seen—the greater the diversity of its faces. Throughout centuries and millennia victors have spent the night in the homes of those they have defeated. This diversity is the story of the crazed hearts of women who passed away long ago, of the wild passions of soldiers intoxicated by victory, of the miraculous tenderness of some foreign Romeo towards some Armenian Juliet.

4

IN YEREVAN, and in towns and villages in the mountains and on the plains, I met people of all kinds. I met scientists, doctors, engineers, builders, artists, journalists, party activists, and old revolutionaries. I saw the foundation, the taproot of a nation that is thousands of years old. I saw plowmen, vintners, and shepherds; I saw masons; I saw murderers, fashionable young "mods," sportsmen, earnest leftists, and cunning opportunists; I saw helpless fools, army colonels, and Lake Sevan fishermen.

And all of these different people were individuals—overbearing, direct, sly, shy, angry, gentle, practical. . . . I saw old villagers clicking their amber worry beads between brown fingers—nearly a century of hard labor amid basalt stone had not hardened or coarsened these men; there was a gentle smile on their faces, and their eyes shone with intelligence.

I saw warriors, knights, thinkers, swindlers, hucksters, poets, builders, astronomers, and preachers. I saw collective-farm chairmen, physicists, and engineers who built bridges.

But what about our usual caricature of the Armenians? The silly, smutty clichés and jokes that have become so ubiquitous? Yes, of course—Armenians are primitive! They are pederasts and swindlers, funny little people. The jokes are endless: "Karapet, my poor fellow, how come you're so yellow?" Yes, where would we be without all those "Radio Armenia" jokes? "Tell me, Karapet. . ." Again and again, with a mocking chuckle: "Our professor, he's an Armenian, you know." Or: "Just think, she's gone and married some little Armenian!"

It is upsetting to think that the world's greatest literature has played its part in reinforcing this stereotype: of the Armenian as huckster, voluptuary, and bribe-taker.

Why has Russian literature been so eager to appeal to the barrack room? Why has it inculcated such mindless, chauvinistic hatred?

Now, after Hitler, it has become more important than ever to look at the question of nationalism—of nationalistic contempt and nationalistic arrogance.

What a distance there is between the caricature Armenians of these jokes and the thousands and thousands of real Armenian peasants, soldiers, scientists, doctors, and engineers—each with their own complexities and idiosyncrasies.

What is it that gathers the diversity of individuals into the unity of a national character?

For individuals, no matter how diverse they may be, all partake of a particular national character. In all these different people there exists some hint of a national character, some coloring with which it has endowed them.

I have spoken to hundreds of people, all with their own interests, passions, sorrows, and hopes, their own destiny, their own friends and enemies. What is there in common between the life and fate, the sorrows and hopes of an elderly shepherd living on the slopes of Mount Aragats, and the life and fate of a young graduate student, yearning for her boyfriend in Moscow, writing a thesis about eighteenth-century French literature and desperately wanting to buy a coat of artificial fur? But just as thousands of streams running through forests, mountain rocks, and desert sands, just as thousands of silent, thoughtful, roaring, foaming, transparent, and turbid streams can spring from the same underground source and contain the same minerals—so all these human characters and fates are united by thousands of years of Armenian history, by the tragedy that befell the Armenians in Turkey, by the longing every Armenian feels for the lands of Kars and Van.[9]

What constitutes the character of a nation is the character of many individual human beings; every national character is, in essence, simply human nature. All the world's nations, therefore, have a great deal in common with one another.

The foundation of any national character is human nature. A national character is simply a particular coloring taken on by human nature, a particular crystallization of it.

Communication between people of different nationalities enriches human society and makes it more colorful. But this process of enrichment cannot take place without freedom.

When people are free, communication between different nations is fruitful and beneficial.

Imagine our Russian intellectuals, the kind, merry, perceptive old women in our villages, our elderly workers, our young lads, our little girls being free to enter the melting pot of ordinary human intercourse with the people of North and South America, of China, France, India, Britain, and the Congo.

What a rich variety of customs, fashion, cuisine, and labor would then be revealed! What a wonderful human community would then come into being, emerging out of the many peculiarities of national characters and ways of life.

And the beggarliness, blindness, and inhumanity of narrow nationalism and hostility between states would be clearly demonstrated.

It is time we recognized that all men are brothers.

Reactionaries seek to excise and destroy the deepest and most essentially human aspects of a nation's character; they promulgate its most inhuman and superficial aspects. They prefer the husk to the kernel.

When they promulgate nationalism, reactionaries try to destroy what people share at a deep level; they recognize only what people share at the most superficial level. Reactionaries worship what they see as the national type—and this worship of everything merely national fused with a contempt for more essential qualities is as absurd and ugly as the caricatures of Armenians that you hear in a Russian barrack room; it is the same phenomenon, with a plus sign instead of a minus sign.

Any struggle for national dignity and national freedom is first of all a struggle for human dignity and human freedom. Those who fight for true national freedom are fighting against mandatory typecasting, against a blind obsession with national character—whether characterized as positive or negative. The true champions of a nation's freedom are those who reject the limitations of stereotypes and affirm the rich diversity of human nature to be found within this nation.

It is important to understand what is primary and what is secondary. Of course, there is such a thing as national character. Nevertheless, far from being the foundation of human nature, it is simply one of the many colors, the many timbres, that human nature takes on.

During the twentieth century the importance of national character has been hugely exaggerated. This has happened in both great and small nations.

But when a large and strong nation, with huge armies and powerful weapons, proclaims its superiority, it threatens other nations with war and enslavement. The nationalistic excesses of small oppressed nations, on the other hand, spring from the need to defend their dignity and freedom. And yet, for all their differences, the nationalism of the aggressors and the nationalism of the oppressed have much in common.

The nationalism of a small nation can, with treacherous ease, become detached from its roots in what is noble and human. It then becomes pitiful, making the nation appear smaller rather than greater. It is the same with nations as with individuals; while trying to draw attention to the inadequacies of others, people all too often reveal their own.

Talking with some Armenian intellectuals, I was aware of their national pride; they were proud of their history, their generals, their ancient architecture, their poetry, and their science. Well and good! I understood their feelings.

But I met others who insisted on the absolute superiority of Armenians in every realm of human creativity, be it architecture, science, or poetry. The temple at Garni, they believed, was superior to the Acropolis, which was both saccharine and crude. One otherwise intelligent woman tried to convince me that Tumanyan was a greater poet than Pushkin. Whether or not Tumanyan really is finer than Pushkin, or Garni finer than the Acropolis, is of course beside the point. What is sadly apparent from these claims is that poetry, architecture, science, and history no longer mean anything to these people. They matter only insofar as they testify to the superiority of the Armenian nation. Poetry itself does not matter; all that matters is to prove that Armenia's national poet is greater than, say, the French or the Russian national poet.

Without realizing it, these people are impoverishing their hearts and souls by ceasing to take any real enjoyment in poetry, architecture, and science, seeing in them only a way of establishing their national supremacy. This compulsion was so fanatical that at times it seemed insane.

But I understood that this excessive sense of self-importance could, for the main part, be blamed on those who throughout long centuries had trampled on Armenian dignity. It could be blamed on the Turkish murderers who had shed innocent Armenian blood; on those who had occupied and conquered Armenia; on those who told silly jokes at the Armenians' expense.

But this long dispute between the negative and positive Armenian stereotypes is not what really matters. What matters is the need to move from the rigidity of national stereotypes towards something more truly human; what matters is to discover the riches of human hearts and souls; what matters is the human content of poetry and science, the universal charm and beauty of architecture; what matters is human courage and nobility; what matters is the magnanimity of a nation's leaders and historical figures. Only by exalting what is truly human, only by fusing the national with what is universally human, can true dignity—and true freedom—be achieved.

It is the struggle for human spiritual and material wealth, the struggle for freedom of thought and expression, the struggle for a peasant's freedom to sow what he wants to sow, for everyone's freedom to enjoy the fruits of their own work—*this* is the true struggle for national dignity.

The only real triumph of national freedom is one that brings about the triumph of true human freedom.

For small nations and large nations alike, this is the only way forward.

And it goes without saying that Russians too—as well as Armenians, Georgians, Kazakhs, Kalmyks, and Uzbeks—must understand that it is precisely through renouncing the idea of their own national superiority that they can most truly affirm the grandeur and dignity of their own people, of their own literature and science.

5

THE TRAIN arrived in Yerevan on the morning of November 3. No one was there to meet me, though I had sent a telegram in advance to Martirosyan, the writer whose book I had come to translate. I had been certain he would be there; I had even imagined that other Armenian writers would also be coming to meet me. And so there I was on the platform, under a warm, pale-blue sky, wearing a thick woolen scarf, a cloth cap, and a new autumn coat I had just bought in order to look respectable in Armenia. Muscovite experts in sartorial matters had looked me up and down and said, "Well, it's hardly chic, but it'll do for a translator." In one hand I had a case, quite a heavy one—I was, after all, going to be in Armenia for two months. In the other I had a bag with a heavy manuscript—a word-for-word translation of an epic novel by a prominent Armenian writer about the construction of a copper-smelting plant.

The exclamations of joy had died down and dark eyes were no longer gleaming all around me; my fellow passengers and the hundreds of people who had come to meet them had all hurried away to line up for taxis. The Moscow–Yerevan train had crawled off to the yards; the murky, rain-stained windows and the dusty green flanks of coaches that, after nearly three thousand kilometers, looked tired and sweaty—everything had now disappeared. Everything around me was unfamiliar, and my heart sank—the last little piece of Moscow had slipped away from me.

I saw a large square in front of the station, and a huge half-naked young man on a bronze horse. His sword was drawn, and I realized this must be David of Sasun.[10] I was struck by the power of this statue: David himself, his steed, his sword—everything was huge, full of movement and strength.

I stood in the spacious square and wondered why no one had come to meet me. Arrogance? Forgetfulness? Eastern indolence? Some muddle with the telegram? I looked around the square, glancing up at the magnificent monument. . . . The power of David and his steed, the movement captured in the bronze—suddenly all this seemed too much. It was not a legend realized in bronze but a bronze advertisement for a legend.

I was upset. Should I go straight to the hotel? Without a document, I wouldn't be let in. Should I trail around the Armenian capital, under the hot sun, wearing a warm coat, a cap, and a thick scarf? A stranger wandering through an alien city always seems sad and absurd. The young and fashionable love nothing more than to laugh at some old countrywoman passing through Moscow in her rustic felt boots, or at some old Yakut walking through Theater Square in a fur jacket on a sultry August afternoon.

Thank heavens none of my fellow passengers had seen me. Yesterday I had haughtily rejected their attempts to tell me how to go by bus to the hotel. They had understood that I was being met by someone with a car.

A few minutes later I was in line for the left-luggage office, standing in the cool half dark. There was no sign of any artificial fur coats here, only a sad young woman with a docile child; a young lad in a trade-school forage cap; a young lieutenant, evidently from a village, who had the eyes of a child and who seemed unused to his country's vast spaces; and an old man with a suitcase made of wood.

Now I am walking through the square. No one so much as glances at me: I'm just a man in a jacket. I'm just someone going for a walk; I've gone out to buy some flatbread or half a liter of beer; I'm on my way to the clinic for some kind of treatment. No one imagines that I've only just arrived, that I'm feeling lost, and that I can only half remember the address of the one person I know in Yerevan, the

writer Martirosyan.

I board a bus. For some reason I feel awkward about admitting I don't know the price of a ticket. I give the conductor a ruble. He gestures at me: Haven't I got any change? I shake my head, even though I have several small coins in my pocket. The price turns out to be the same as in Moscow.

Your first minutes on the streets of an unfamiliar city are always special; what happens in later months or years can never supplant them. These minutes are filled with the visual equivalent of nuclear energy, a kind of nuclear power of attention. With penetrating insight and an all-pervading excitement, you absorb a huge universe—houses, trees, faces of passersby, signs, squares, smells, dust, cats and dogs, the color of the sky. During these minutes, like an omnipotent God, you bring a new world into being; you create, you build inside yourself a whole city with all its streets and squares, with its courtyards and patios, with its sparrows, with its thousands of years of history, with its food shops and its shops for manufactured goods, with its opera house and its canteens. This city that suddenly arises from nonbeing is a special city; it differs from the city that exists in reality—it is the city of a particular person. Its autumn leaves have their own unique way of rustling; there is something special about the smell of its dust, about the way its young boys fire their slingshots.

And it takes only a few minutes, not even hours, to accomplish this miracle of creation. And when a man dies, there dies with him a unique, unrepeatable world that he himself has created—a whole universe with its own oceans and mountains, with its own sky. These oceans and this sky are strikingly similar to the billions of oceans and skies in the minds of others; this universe is strikingly similar to the one and only universe that exists in its own right, regardless of humanity. But these mountains, these waves, this particular grass, and this particular pea soup have something unique about them, something that has come into being only recently; they have their own tints, their own quiet splashing and rustling—they are part of a particular universe that lives in the soul of the man who has created it.

And so there I was, sitting in a bus, walking across a square, looking at the titanic bronze Stalin and at houses, built from pink and yellow-gray tufa, that reproduce the contours of ancient Armenian churches with a grace that seems entirely natural; there I was, creating my own special Yerevan—a Yerevan remarkably similar to the Yerevan in the external world, a Yerevan remarkably similar to the city present in the minds of the thousands of other people walking about on the streets, and at the same time distinct from all these other Yerevans. It was my own Yerevan, my own unrepeatable Yerevan. The autumn leaves of its plane trees rustled in their own peculiar way; its sparrows were shouting in their own peculiar way.

I was in the main square. On each side was a large building built from pink tufa: the Intourist hotel Armenia, for Armenians from the diaspora coming to visit their motherland; the Soviet of the National Economy, responsible for everything to do with Armenian marble, basalt, tufa, copper, aluminum, cognac, and electricity; the architecturally perfect Soviet of Ministers; and the post office, where my heart would later race anxiously when I went to pick up letters sent general delivery. I came to the main boulevard, where the sparrows were shouting wildly, in Armenian, among the brown leaves of the plane trees. I passed the wonderful Yerevan market, with its heaps of fruit and vegetables in every color—yellow, red, orange, white, and blue-black—with the velvet of its peaches, the Baltic amber of its grapes, its juicy red-orange persimmons, its pomegranates and chestnuts, its mighty eighteen-inch-long radishes that seemed to belong to some phallic cult, its garlands of *churchkhela*,[11] its hills of cabbages and dunes of walnuts, its fiery peppers, its fragrant and spicy green leaves.

I already knew that it was Tamanyan who had created the architectural style of the new Yerevan, and that he had drawn his inspiration from ancient Armenian churches;[12] I knew he had resurrected

an ancient ornamental pattern depicting a bunch of grapes and the head of an eagle. . . . Later, people showed me the very finest creations of Armenian architects; they took me to see a street of detached houses, every one of which was a masterpiece. But, considering them of no interest, these people never showed me the old buildings; nor did they show me the inner courtyards hidden behind the façades both of the temple-like modern buildings and of the squat nineteenth-century buildings that had marched into Yerevan along with the Russian infantry. All this, however, I had already seen—on my very first day in Yerevan.

The inner yard! What constitutes the kernel, the heart and soul of Yerevan is not its churches or government buildings, not its railway stations, not its theater or its concert hall, nor its three-story palace of a department store. No, what constitutes the soul of Yerevan are its inner courtyards. Flat roofs, long staircases, short flights of steps, little corridors and balconies, terraces of all sizes, plane trees, a fig tree, a climbing vine, a little table, small benches, passages, verandas—everything fits harmoniously together, one thing leading into another, one thing emerging from another. Linking all the balconies and verandas, like arteries and nerve fibers, are hundreds of long lines on which the copious and motley linen of the inhabitants of Yerevan has been hung out to dry. Here are the sheets on which the black-browed men and women sleep and make children; here are the vast, sail-like brassieres of hero-mothers; here are the shirts of little girls; here are the underpants, discolored in the crotch, of Armenian old men; here are lace veils, swaddling clothes, and little babies' trousers. Here we see the city as a living organism, stripped of its outer skin. Here we see all of Eastern life: the tenderness of the heart, the peristalsis of the gut, the firing of synapses, the power of both blood kinship and the ties that link everyone born in the same town or village. Old men click their worry beads and exchange leisurely smiles; children get up to mischief; smoke rises from braziers; quince and peach preserves simmer in copper pans; washing tubs disappear in clouds of steam; green-eyed cats watch their mistresses pluck chickens. We are not far from Turkey. We are not far from Persia.

The inner yard! It links different eras: the present, when a four-engined Ilyushin-18 can take you from Moscow to Yerevan in a few hours, and the days of camel paths and caravansaries.

And so I go on building my own Yerevan. I grind up, crush, absorb, and inhale its basalt and its rose-colored tufa, its asphalt and its cobblestones, the glass of its shop windows, its monuments to Stalin and Lenin, its monuments to Abovyan, Shaumyan, and Charents, the countless portraits of Anastas Mikoyan;[13] I absorb and inhale faces, accents, the frenzied roar of cars being driven at speed by frenzied drivers. I see a lot of people with big noses, a lot of faces covered in black stubble; I understand that it can't be easy to shave iron beards.

I see today's Yerevan with its factories, its huge, tall blocks of new apartments for workers, its splendid opera house, its magnificent pink schools, its academic institutions, its precious repository for books and manuscripts—the Matenadaran—and its famous Academy of Sciences. The academy looks graceful and harmonious.

I see Mount Ararat—it stands high in the blue sky. With its gentle, tender contours, it seems to grow not out of the earth but out of the sky, as if it has condensed from its white clouds and its deep blue. It is this snowy mountain, this bluish-white sunlit mountain that shone in the eyes of those who wrote the Bible.

The young and fashionable of this city love black suits. The shops are well supplied; there is plenty of butter, sausages, and meat. And the young women are lovely, though some of them really do have terribly big noses. One thing astonishes me: An old man or woman has only to raise their hand and a bus driver will stop for them; people here are kind and compassionate. Pretty young women walk along the pavement, clicking their thin high heels; dandies in hats lead sheep they have bought for the

impending holiday; the sheep click their little hooves on the pavement, and the young women click their fashionable little heels; amid the fine buildings and the neon lights, the sheep smell their death. Some of them try to resist, to dig their little hooves in; afraid of dirtying their clothes, the dandies push the sheep, trying to get them to move; the sheep, full of the anguish of their coming death, lie down on the pavement; the behatted dandies, still afraid of dirtying their clothes, lift them up; the anguished sheep scatter their little black peas. Women with kind faces are carrying chickens and turkeys by their legs; the birds' heads hang down. These little heads must be swollen and painful, and the birds arch their necks in order, at least slightly, to reduce their sufferings. Their round pupils look at Yerevan without reproach. There too—in the birds' confused and spinning little heads—a city of pink tufa is coming into being.

Lord and creator, I wander through the streets of Yerevan; I build Yerevan in my soul. Yerevan—this city that Armenians say has existed for two thousand seven hundred years; this city that was invaded by both Mongols and Persians; this city that was visited by Greek merchants and occupied by Paskevich's army;[14] this city that, only three hours earlier, did not exist at all.

But then this creator, this almighty ruler begins to feel anxious; he starts glancing around uneasily.

Whom can I ask? Many of the people around me do not speak Russian—I feel shy, embarrassed to address them. The lord and master is tongue-tied. And so I enter a courtyard. But no—not a chance. This courtyard is nothing like our own deserted Russian yards—it is an Eastern courtyard, an Eastern inner yard, and I am at once scrutinized by dozens of pairs of eyes. I hurry back out onto the street. Very soon, however, I enter another courtyard. My anxiety is growing—I am no longer meditating on how, in the East, the inner yard is the heart and soul of life. But it truly *is* the heart and soul of life—and so, once again, I go back out onto the street. What am I to do?

I rush into a third courtyard—and am filled with despair. I see a network of little staircases and balconies, an old man sipping coffee from a little cup, a group of women who break off their conversation to look at me. I smile confusedly and turn back. Everywhere I look, there is life! What am I to do? There is nothing poetic about my thoughts now. Should I try to find Martirosyan as quickly as possible? But what help would that be? I can't turn up in his house and, ignoring his attempts to introduce me to his wife and family, ignoring everyone's questions, make a dash for the toilet. I've heard that Armenian intellectuals are fond of gossip. I can't burst into the apartment of one of the masters of Armenian prose and trample people underfoot as I dash towards the water closet. I'd never be able to live it down—people would be joking about this throughout my stay in Armenia. No, it was out of the question. And so—I jump into a half-empty tram. For three kopeks I acquire a ticket. I sit myself down on the hard seat, and for a while I breathe more freely. No longer am I a lord and creator—I am the slave of a base need. This need controls me; it has power over my thoughts and my soul. It has fettered my proud brain.

The whole world—architecture, the outlines of mountains, plants and trees, people's customs and habits—everything is now subordinated to a single longing.

I see tall boxlike buildings; I see squares; I see a grocery store, a television shop, a bakery, a building site; I see a bridge, a deep gorge, houses clinging to its stone slopes, quick foaming water far down below. Everything is new to me; I am seeing everything for the first time. But no longer is the creator's power of thought constructing an entire capital city—old quarters and new quarters at once. The creator's thought is now obstinately focused on a single goal—yet open to all possible ways of achieving it. How, in a given building, are the toilets arranged? The construction sites are still largely unmechanized and there are crowds of workers everywhere—just what I don't want. Behind every pile of bricks I'll find people, people, and still more people. . . . But if I get out by the bridge and

stand on top of the cliff, I might get dizzy. My blood pressure feels terribly high. . . . But the torrent at the bottom of the gorge is white with foam. It looks beautiful!

A children's park. . . . Hopeless! You can see right through it from every side. The trees are mere twigs; they must have only just been planted. Even an infant would feel awkward behind a tree as small as these.

And then smoking chimneys—a factory with an entire settlement around it. . . . Districts like this are densely populated; the little houses are close together and there is a family in every room.

Then there's a grating of wheels, and the tram makes a sharp turn. The road has come to an end; now there is only wasteland and scree. Nearly all the passengers get out; only two others are left, both unshaven, their faces covered in black stubble. One has a long nose, the other a snub Mongolian nose. And me. The conductress gives me a searching look. She walks down the car to the driver and says a few quick words to him in Armenian. Evidently, she is sharing her suspicions with him. Yes, she glances around at me: What is this strange man after—this strange man in glasses? What is he doing at the terminus, amid a wasteland of clay and scree?

In a moment the driver will walk up to me, and then, out of nowhere, a policeman will appear. What will I say? That I'm from Moscow, that this is my first time in Yerevan? And that, in order to get to know the city, I needed to see these wastelands and scrap heaps? I'll get flustered, of course. I won't admit the truth; I won't say why I've made this journey to the city's outskirts. And it really will all look very strange indeed: A man leaves his things in the left-luggage office, no one turns up to meet him, he wanders about the city for hours, he doesn't register his arrival at any official institution; he makes no attempt to get a hotel room or even a bed in the House of the Collective Farmer. Instead, he makes his way to some outlying district where there is nothing but pits and scrap heaps. Yes, it's all very strange indeed, very perplexing. Or rather, it's all only too obvious.

Then, with my back to the wall, terror-stricken, I will admit the truth. I will admit the base and absurd need that has driven me to the outskirts of the Armenian capital. But no one will believe me—by then I will have told so many lies that the truth will seem like a joke. By then it will be only too obvious that I'm a saboteur—an old wolf of a spy who has finally given himself away. . . .

The tram has reached the end of the line, and no one has stopped me. I dash into some wasteland and find a safe place, out of sight among the ditches and scree. . . .

Happiness. Do I need to describe this feeling? For thousands of years poets have been striving to convey on paper the nature of happiness. . . .

All I will say here is that what I felt was not the proud happiness of a creator, the happiness of a thinker whose omnipotent mind has created its own unique and inimitable reality. It was a quiet happiness that is equally accessible to a sheep, a bull, a human being, or a macaque. Need I have gone all the way to Mount Ararat to experience it?

6

TO SAY that all Armenians are splendid is much the same as to say that they are all hucksters and swindlers.

Armenians are people, and people differ; there are both good and bad. Nevertheless, I can't resist making the following, slightly less sweeping generalization: Armenian peasants are good people.

I spent two months in Armenia, almost half of the time in Yerevan. But I did not get to know anyone from the Yerevan literary world. I arrived in Yerevan knowing two people: one was Martirosyan and the other was Hortensia, the translator responsible for the literal version of Martirosyan's novel about a copper works. And I left Yerevan knowing Martirosyan, Martirosyan's family, and Hortensia the translator.

Now and again Martirosyan introduced me to writers he knew, but this led only to a few nods of acknowledgment. Not one of these writers even bothered to ask about my journey or how I liked Yerevan—although it's true I was once asked if I was going to republish my *Notes of d'Archiac*.[15] The editor of the Russian-language *Literary Armenia* neither invited me to contribute to his journal nor showed even the least ordinary human interest in me. He did not ask me a single question; he made no attempt to bring about even a pretense of ordinary human intercourse. I was treated in exactly the same way by the secretary of the Writers' Union and by two poets, one a man, the other a woman. All this upset me. I had heard that the intelligentsia of Yerevan was very patriotic, sensitive to what was written about Armenians in other languages. And I happened to have written quite a lot about Armenians: in my wartime articles for *Red Star* and in my novels *The People Immortal* and *For a Just Cause*. All these had been translated into Armenian, and I had received appreciative letters from Armenian readers. In short, I expected the Armenians to take an interest in me and my work, and I had imagined they would want to publish something of mine in *Literary Armenia*. I had even brought a short story with me—but no one asked me for anything. It was possible, of course, that all this was the consequence of my recent troubles. My new novel had been greeted by my editors with fury. It was not going to be published.[16]

This thought was disturbing. But I was not in a mood to exaggerate my own importance. I began to think up a still more painful explanation: It was nothing to do with my having fallen into disgrace—it was simply that I was a nobody, both as a writer and as a human being. I was a pygmy—so what did I expect?

After a while, I got used to being ignored. But there were still moments when I felt disheartened. I spent the whole of New Year's Day in my hotel room—I would have been glad to receive a phone call even from a dog. The invention of the great Edison is of little use to someone as lonely as I was then.[17] It was some consolation to discover what kind of visitors Armenian writers *did* see as important: certain Moscow officials and a lady from the Literary Fund, whose role was to authorize holidays in sanatoriums and houses of recreation. And the writers of Yerevan had been truly dazzled by a few other figures whose importance as literary bureaucrats, in my view, greatly outweighed their gifts as writers.

Whereas I—I had been imagining myself as another Plato, generously honoring with my conversation not only Yerevan's writers and artists but also its physicists, biologists, and astronomers.

The only person I ever, in fact, conversed with was the old woman whose job was to sit in my

corridor in the hotel. She evidently thought well of me: a man who worked from morning till night, who never staggered drunkenly down the corridor, who didn't sing in a hoarse voice at two o'clock in the morning, accompanying himself on a squeeze-box, and who didn't bring young women back to his room. Forgetting my poverty, my various illnesses, and my age, the naïve old woman evidently ascribed my behavior entirely to my high moral standards.

Another source of comfort was Martirosyan's response when I asked him about Osip Mandelstam's visit to Armenia. I knew some sweet and touching details about Mandelstam's time in Armenia and I had read his Armenian cycle of poems. I remembered his words about "an Armenian Christianity of beasts and fables."

But Martirosyan did not remember Mandelstam. At my request, he phoned several poets from the older generation—none of them knew that Mandelstam had ever been in Armenia. Nor had they read his Armenian poems. Martirosyan told me that he remembered a thin man with a large nose who seemed to be very poor. There had been two evenings when Martirosyan had given him something to eat and drink. And this man with the big nose had read some poems—yes, it must have been Mandelstam. . . .

The impression made on Martirosyan by the lady from the Literary Fund had been infinitely more vivid. I was beginning to get the picture.

Mandelstam's poems are splendid. They are the very essence of poetry: the music of words. Perhaps even a little too much so. Sometimes I think that the poetry of the twentieth century, for all its brilliance, has less of the universal humanity and passion that imbues the great poetry of the nineteenth century. As if poetry had moved from a bakery to a jeweler's shop and great bakers had been replaced by great jewelers. This may be why the work of some fine contemporary poets is so complicated—as if this is the only way they can distinguish their creations from the platinum meter bar kept in Sèvres, which is now the measure of all things and all souls.

But there is an enchanting music in Mandelstam's poems, and some are among the finest poems written in Russian since the death of Blok. Although, to be honest, Blok is not one of my idols either—he too never baked the holy rye bread that is the only true measure of all things and all souls. In his verse too there is much that has been fashioned not by the miracle-working hands of a baker but by the subtle talent of a jeweler. Nevertheless, some of his poems, some of his individual lines, stand up against anything written since the deaths of Pushkin and Lermontov. And although Mandelstam was unable to shoulder the entire great burden of the Russian poetic tradition, he is still a genuine and wonderful poet. There is an abyss between him and those who only pretend to write poetry.

And my acquaintances in Yerevan did not remember Mandelstam's visit to Armenia. Yes, I was beginning to get the picture.

After a while all this ceased to preoccupy me and I began to think about other things. In many of the city's museums I saw portraits of Decembrists who had been reduced to the ranks and sent to serve in Yerevan.[18] I read that it was they who put on the very first production of *Woe from Wit*,[19] playing both the male and the female roles. The local intelligentsia had felt proud that this premiere took place not in Moscow or Petersburg but in Yerevan. I read an unforgettable account of Nalbandian's year of misery and illness in Kamyshin, a dusty little dump of a town in the Volga basin.[20] I read how Tumanyan was imprisoned in Petersburg and Korolenko was at the prison gates to greet him on his release.[21] Among other people still remembered in Yerevan are Davit Guramishvili, the Georgian exile who lived in Mirgorod in the Ukraine; Skovoroda, the Ukrainian wandering philosopher; and a certain Ukrainian soldier exiled to the sands beside the Caspian Sea.[22]

The verses written by a disgraced lieutenant of the Tengin Regiment[23] and the verses of a

disgraced court councillor from Petersburg[24] live on in the minds of schoolchildren, students, and peasants up in the mountains. They do not fade with historical catastrophes or the passage of time.

And in Siberian forests and the tundra of Yakutia the work begun by revolutionary students and such exiles as Korolenko, Vladimir Bogoraz,[25] and Pyotr Kropotkin[26] still lives on. Their poems and stories, their fairy tales about universal human concerns still hold sway in schools and institutes, in dwellings high in the Caucasus, in Russian peasant huts and Siberian yurts. Here we have Russification at its most free, at its kindest and most indestructible—the process of Russification carried out by Pushkin, Dobrolyubov, Herzen, Nekrasov, Tolstoy, and Korolenko.[27]

But just think how many governors and generals, how many full privy councillors, dignitaries of state-sponsored science and state-honored literature—just think how many such figures have disappeared forever from the memory of the Caucasus.

True brotherhood and true lasting ties between people and nations are born not in offices, not in governors' palaces, but in peasant huts, during journeys into exile, in camps and soldiers' barracks. These are the links that last. It is the words written beneath dim oil lamps, the words read by people lying on bed boards in prison cells or sitting in peasant huts or smoky little rooms, that create the binding ties of unity, love, and mutual national respect.

These are the hidden arteries through which eternal blood goes on flowing even though life's noisy surface remains entirely sterile. Like soap bubbles, this official life fills people who are nothing but soap bubbles themselves. The bubbles whisper, pop—and disappear without trace.

While the ties laid down by stonemasons, carpenters, tinsmiths, coopers, and old peasant women remain forever.

There it is—a pot of Russian borshch, now standing on a table in an Armenian home. And there, serious and silent, a group of bearded Molokan peasants[28] are eating a garlicky dish of Armenian *khash*.

In this respect, people's receptivity and their conservatism are equally striking. There are, after all, thousands of customs, thousands of ways of doing things which, even after centuries of proximity, make no impression on the life of a neighboring people. A Russian peasant and an Armenian peasant bake bread in different ovens, and their bread is different. The Russian obstinately refuses to eat the flat Armenian *lavash* baked in a tandoor oven, and the Armenian is indifferent to the leavened rye bread baked in a Russian stove. And yet these two peoples have enriched each other's lives through countless other customs, utensils, and ways of working.

One of Paskevich's soldiers, after marching all over Armenia in his heavy boots, brought back with him new ways of laying bricks and cutting stone, borrowed from Armenian masons. This act of "Armenianization" was effected without rifles or cannon. A few men simply laughed and clapped one another on the back. One winked; another said, "Yes, very smart!" They had a smoke—and that was that.

And there are the links established in Soviet times: between Russian and Armenian factory workers and engineers; between Russian and Armenian students; between Russian and Armenian scientists working in libraries and laboratories; between Russian and Armenian agronomists, vintners, astronomers, and physicists.

When I first went out for a walk around the mountain village of Tsakhkadzor, I was a foreigner. Passersby stared at me. Women by the water pump, old men sitting under a stone wall and clicking their worry beads, chauffeurs (our twentieth-century cavaliers) laughing and shouting outside the restaurant—everyone fell silent as I, dragging my feet and embarrassed at being the focus of so much attention, made my way between the little one-story stone houses. I went by; everyone exchanged

knowing looks.

I saw curtains twitching in the windows: A new Russian visitor had appeared in the village.

After this, I was thoroughly studied and analyzed. Everything known to the clerks in the House of Creativity quickly became public knowledge: I'd handed in my passport to be registered; I'd refused to eat *khash*; I didn't speak Armenian; I was married, with two children; and I was from Moscow. I was a translator and I had come to translate a book by Martirosyan. The translator was not young, but he drank cognac, played billiards atrociously, and wrote a lot of letters. The translator often went out for walks, and he was interested in the old church on the edge of the village; he sometimes called out in Russian to Armenian cats and dogs. He'd gone into a village house where an old woman was baking *lavash* in a tandoor. The translator knew no Armenian and the old woman didn't know a word of Russian. The translator had laughed and gestured to her: He wanted to know how *lavash* is baked. And the old woman had also laughed when the smoke from the dried dung that fueled her tandoor had made the foreigner weep.

Then the old woman brought out a little bench. The foreigner sat down—the silky column of smoke now hung safely over his head. The Muscovite admired the way the old woman flattened the dough in the air, not against a board but up in the air. She threw sheets of dough into the air and caught them in her outstretched hands, her fingers spread apart. The force of its own weight gradually made the dough thinner and thinner, turning it into a large fine sheet. The Muscovite admired the old woman's flowing movements, which were both careful and confident; they seemed like a beautiful ancient dance. And the dance truly was very old, as old as the first baked *lavash*. And the shaggy seventy-year-old woman in her torn quilted jacket sensed the admiration of the gray-haired, bespectacled Muscovite. This pleased her, and it made her feel both merry and melancholy. Then her daughter and son-in-law arrived; the son-in-law's face was covered with blue stubble. And then her granddaughter turned up; she was wearing pink stretchy trousers and dragging a little sledge behind her. Everyone laughed; then the old woman shouted imperiously in Armenian. The translator was brought a small plate of dry, greenish cheese. The cheese looked moldy, but it was very tasty—sharp and fragrant. The translator was given a hot *lavash*, taught how to wrap it around the cheese, and then brought a mug of milk.

And when the translator left, his eyes red from the smoke, the dog, instead of barking as it had done on his arrival, gently wagged its tail—evidently the translator too now gave off some familiar bitter smell. As for the old woman's family, they all stood by the little stone wall to wave goodbye: the thin, black-haired daughter; the thin, unshaven son-in-law; and the little granddaughter with the coal-black eyes.

Then the Muscovite went to the post office and tried to send off some airmail letters, but they turned out not to have the right envelopes—though it took some time to establish this, since the black-eyed young women at the post office did not speak any Russian. This led to everyone shouting, laughing, and waving their arms about.

The following day the translator set off along a mountain path and came to a cemetery where an old man was digging a grave. The translator shook his head. The old man made a despairing gesture, threw away a half-finished cigarette, and returned to his digging. And then the translator went past a water pump and offered to help a woman carry a bucket of water back home. But the woman was overcome with shyness. She looked down at the ground and set off with the bucket, leaving the translator standing there helpless.

And then the translator stood for a long time by some masons who were building a pink tufa wall around a school yard. The masons were cutting and dressing the stone and fitting the blocks together;

women in quilted cotton trousers, with scarves wound around their heads and faces, were preparing the clay mortar. When fragments of pink stone landed on the passerby, the women's eyes gleamed with laughter from beneath their scarves.

And then the translator conversed with a mule and a sheep who were walking along the pavement towards their mountain pasture. He had noticed that people and dogs, for some reason, walked in the road, while the pavements were used mainly by sheep, calves, cows, and horses. At first the mule listened fairly attentively to the translator's Russian words, but then it laid back its ears, turned away from him, and tried to kick him with a back hoof. Its kind, sweet little face with its wonderful broad nostrils was suddenly transformed. Now the mule looked vicious, curling its upper lip and baring its huge teeth. And the ewe, which the translator had wanted to stroke, pressed up against the mule, asking for help and protection. This was ineffably touching; the ewe sensed instinctively that the human hand stretched out towards her was a bearer of death—and so there she was, trying to get away from death, asking a four-legged mule to protect her from the hand that had created steel and thermonuclear weapons.

And then the new arrival went to the village shop and bought a piece of baby soap, some toothpaste, and a small packet of purgative. Then the translator made his way back home, thinking about the ewe.

The ewe had bright eyes, rather like glass grapes. There was something human about her—something Jewish, Armenian, mysterious, indifferent, unintelligent. Shepherds have been looking at sheep for thousands of years. And sheep, for their part, have been looking at shepherds. And so shepherds and sheep have become similar. A sheep's eyes look at a human being in a particular way; they are glassy and alienated. The eyes of a horse, a cat, or a dog look at people quite differently.

The inhabitants of a Jewish ghetto would probably have looked at their Gestapo jailers with the same alienated disgust if the ghetto had existed for millennia, if day after day for five thousand years the Gestapo had been taking old women and children away to be destroyed in gas chambers.

Oh God, how desperately mankind needs to atone, to beg for forgiveness. How long mankind needs to beg the sheep for forgiveness, to beg sheep not to go on looking at them with that glassy gaze. What meek and proud contempt that gaze contains. What godlike superiority—the superiority of an innocent herbivore over a murderer who writes books and creates computing machines! The translator repented before the ewe, knowing he would be eating her meat the following day.

A second day passed, and a third. The new arrival ceased to think of himself as an exotic parrot in this mountain village. Now the people he met were beginning to greet him. And he was greeting them back.

He already knew many people: the young women from the post office; the man at the village shop; the night watchman—a melancholy man with a rifle; two shepherds; the old man who looked after the thousand-year-old walls of the Kecharis monastery. He knew Karapet-aga, the man with gray hair and light-blue eyes who had returned to Armenia from Syria and whom he often saw standing outside the village restaurant; he knew Volodya Golosyan, the handsome and imposing driver; he knew the physical-training instructor, who wore green ski pants and who had the protuberant brow and laughing face of a strong young ram; he knew mad old Andreas; he knew the woman who fed turkeys under a fig tree; he knew the young drivers of three-ton trucks, who tore along the steep little streets like hurricanes. These drivers had the souls of eagles and the fingers of a Paganini.

In the House of Creativity I had got to know the kind, sweet smile of Katya, the thin little cook; I knew how she blushed if someone praised the soup she had made. Katya told me that she had come to Armenia from Zaporozhye[29] and that her husband was a Molokan. Embarrassed, she told me how

strange she found it that Molokans drink tea at weddings and don't touch wine and how very strange the Leapers and Jumpers are.[30] She informed me in a dignified tone that "Our own Tsakhkadzor Molokans don't leap and jump." Katya is gentle and kind. Her voice, her movements, her gait are all timid and indecisive. Everything embarrasses her. Her little son, Alyosha, who is in his first year at school, comes in—and Katya blushes and looks down at the floor. And Alyosha blushes too, murmuring something barely audible in reply to my simple "What year are you in at school?" He even looks like his mother. He is pale and has light-blue eyes; he is covered in freckles and his eyebrows and eyelashes are the color of wheat.

"The Armenians are good people," Katya tells me—and blushes. "Armenians are good to one another, they respect their elders," she says—and blushes. But then it becomes apparent that Katya thinks that Armenians are no different from anyone else. Some are drunkards; some like to pick fights; there are even thieves; they're neither better nor worse than us Russians. "But the Armenian peasants work very hard indeed," Katya adds—and blushes profusely.

I know Rosa, the swarthy housekeeper. She has dark down above her upper lip, and she is always smiling, so that people can admire her dazzling, sugar-white teeth. Rosa wears tall box-calf boots, does not know a word of Russian, and keeps herself constantly busy with unproductive work. She always carries an accounts book in which she notes down what her creative workers ate yesterday and what they will be eating tomorrow.

I know Ivan, the boiler man. He is a tall man with blond hair, pale eyes, and a pale mustache; his face looks cruel. He is young and strong, sometimes rude, sometimes sullen. His face is large and round, pink and white, and for some reason this makes him look particularly unpleasant. He stomps about in tall heavy boots. And he talks just as he moves; his every word is like a boot—slow, heavy, and exact. Ivan is a Molokan. Because he is fair-haired and has pale eyes, white teeth, and pink cheeks, and because he is a Molokan, I imagine him drinking only milk and eating only white millet porridge. But Ivan does not keep to the laws of his ancestors; he smokes and he drinks vodka. After a drink, he becomes loquacious; he tells me how he goes up into the mountains and hunts goats and lynx. Once he killed a leopard. . . . His stories lack the iron of authenticity, but he is not so much a liar as a Romantic—a realist for dreamers, a charming fibber among realists. He likes me because I am bad at billiards.

Nearly everyone is competitive, but Ivan is insanely so. Every time he loses a game of billiards to Martirosyan, he truly suffers. Anyone else would just be a bit cross, but Ivan is in torment. "Do you want to play?" he says to me—and in his eyes I see a bloodthirsty gleam, a thirst for sheep's blood.

I have got to know Astra, the cleaner, and Arutyun, the old night watchman, Astra's father-in-law.

Astra is a beauty. I think of Chekhov's "The Beauties": "After leaving the inn, they were silent for a long time. Then the coachman looked round and said to Chekhov, 'Hasn't the little Armenian got a beautiful daughter!' "

Astra is so beautiful that I have no wish to describe her beauty. I will say only that her beauty is the expression of her soul. Her beauty lives in her quiet walk, in her shy movements, in her always lowered eyelids, in her barely perceptible smile, in the soft outline of her girlish shoulders, in the chastity of her poor, almost beggarly clothing, in her thoughtful gray eyes. She is a white water lily in a pond shadowed by the branches of trees, born amid still, contemplative water.

This white blossom is the expression of the water of the forest, an expression of the half dark of the forest, of the vague outlines of plants lying deep in the water, of the way silent white clouds slide over this water, of the reflection in it of the crescent moon and the stars. And all this—streams, backwaters, forest ponds and lakes, rushes and sedges, sunrises and sunsets, rustling leaves and

reeds, the sound of air bubbling up to the surface, the strange lonely sighs from the silt—all this finds its expression in the white water lily.

And in the same way, the world of modest female beauty finds its expression in Astra. As for what may lie hidden in the depths of these waters, no one can say unless he breaks the water's smooth surface, walks barefoot through the cutting sedge, and treads the silty, sucking mud—now cold, now strangely warm. But I only stand on the shore, admiring the lily from a distance.

I imagined that no one was aware of my quiet, modest admiration of Astra—I was, after all, known for my silent melancholy: I was an austere ascetic, doubly so in the presence of Astra.

One day, however, my dear co-translator burst out laughing like Taras Bulba and said, "And as for our dear Astra, Vasily Semyonovich really does like her a great deal. He could eat her for breakfast."

I shrugged and pulled a face.

Really, if Astra's husband is anything like his father, Arutyun, the mournful, dismal, round-shouldered night watchman with the big nose. . . . But what on earth has all this got to do with me?

Arutyun is sad. Sometimes his face and eyes take on a look of piercing melancholy. Sometimes I walk silently past him in the hour before dawn, the hour when every night watchman in the world is asleep—and there he is, looking at me out of the darkness, his eyes full of a vast, still yearning.

I think he never sleeps—some huge sadness prevents him. He never speaks to anyone; no one visits him. Sometimes I see him on the street. He runs into some jolly old Armenian granddad and I think, "Now Arutyun's going to smile. He'll stop, he'll light a cigarette and have a chat about sheep, about bees, about wine." But no—Arutyun shuffles on in his heavy tarpaulin boots, sunk in his vast yearning. What's the matter with him?

It is hard to imagine that it is only a few days since I, a stranger from Moscow, first arrived in this little mountain village, whose existence I had not even suspected.

"*Barev!*" say the people I meet.

And I take my hat off as I reply, "*Barev dzez!*" (Good to you too!) All around me are people I know.

Time passes, and soon I know a great deal more about Ivan, about Katya, about Astra, and about old Arutyun. I have learned much that is sweet and touching—and perhaps still more that is cruel and painful.

Katya's husband is paralyzed; he cannot move his legs and has been bedridden for several years. Quiet Katya, yearning for her distant homeland, for her parents and friends, goes on caring for him, saving every kopek she can in order to give him little treats: an apple, say, or candy. And she says to me proudly, "Our own Tsakhkadzor Molokans do not leap and jump."

Arutyun had five sons. The eldest worked as a drilling engineer. He was killed a year ago in a drunken brawl; someone smashed him on the head with a piece of iron piping. The villagers say he was a bad man. They feel sorry not for him but for the man who killed him and is now in prison.

Arutyun's second son is the husband of the beautiful Astra. Eighteen months ago he went to prison himself—after killing a truck driver in another drunken brawl, in Karapet-aga's restaurant. The driver had come from Lake Sevan, from deep-blue Lake Sevan. With him he had brought his beloved—they wanted to drink, to eat Karapet's famous kebab, to have a good time. Aramais, Astra's husband, was sitting at the next table with a group of friends. He insulted the driver's beloved, who was married to someone else. The driver took offense and hit Aramais in the face. Aramais then stabbed him with a Finnish knife. Apparently Astra never wanted to marry Aramais—he was a ne'er-do-well, a troublemaker, a gambler and drunkard. But Aramais was infatuated; he wept, threw himself drunkenly at her feet, and vowed to kill both her and himself. Astra, her mother, and everyone in the village

knew this was no empty threat. And so now she goes about in ragged clothes and worn-out boots, saving every kopek she can in order to be able to take a little more food to her husband. Every month she travels two hundred and eighty kilometers to see him; he is in a camp now, working in a mine. His sentence is not going to be reduced; he does not have a good record in the camp—he drinks, shirks work, and gets into fights.

Arutyun's third son was recently released from a prison in Yerevan, and Arutyun was himself recently released from the district hospital—this third son had knifed him in the ribs during a quarrel. Arutyun was in the hospital for three months, and his son was in prison for three months—the father saved his son from a worse fate by giving false testimony. Sometimes this third son, a narrow-shouldered young man with a thin face and a heavy, hooked nose, comes to the terrace outside the House of Creativity for a game of billiards. On his face is a schizophrenic smile: sometimes he looks guilty, sometimes insane, sometimes brazenly unconcerned. And his father, old Arutyun, comes along to watch. When the game's over, the son walks past his father in silence. His father is no less silent.

I've heard that Arutyun's fourth son, the wildest one of all, left Armenia three years ago; he was one of the young people who answered the call for volunteers to settle the virgin lands of Siberia. Away he went—and no one has heard from him since. No one has seen him, nobody knows how to find him or even if he is still alive.

Arutyun's fifth son, though mentally retarded, is the least unsatisfactory. His baby face is covered with black down; he smiles affectionately and slobbers as he shows me a picture book—a book of Armenian tales about animals. The animals in the pictures all look Eastern; they have dark hair and Armenian faces. The wolf and the hare have dark hair, and so does the middle-aged fox in a bonnet, peering slyly over her spectacles. But the boy's old enough to be in ninth grade next year. . . . Yes, now I understand why old Arutyun's eyes contain such vast yearning, why his gait, his silence, his insomnia, his hunched back—why everything about him expresses such a vast sorrow.

One day we were having breakfast. The kitchen was unusually full of noise and merriment and I half opened the door to see what was going on. I saw Katya, laughing loudly and blushing deeply. I saw Rosa, the housekeeper, showing her white teeth as she laughed no less loudly. I saw the gloomy and always preoccupied Tigran; this father of six young daughters, this disgraced ex-Secretary of the Party District Committee who was now in charge of the House of Writers, was also laughing. The whole kitchen was laughing, listening to a small, nimble old woman. The old woman was merry, and her shining eyes were full of life. Listening to her talk, even though I didn't understand a word, I began to laugh along with everyone else. Then I was told that this old woman—the merriest woman in the village—was the wife of Arutyun, our night watchman; she was the mother of his five sons. . . . As Knut Hamsun put it, in the wonderful title he gave to one of his novels: *But Life Goes On.*[31]

For some reason or other, or rather for a reason that is only too obvious, I started to remember my earlier encounters, on the streets of Yerevan, with people of standing.

Here in Tsakhkadzor I was learning more and more, getting ever more involved in the life of the village. And this human involvement continued in spite of everything. It hardly mattered that the people I met spoke Russian so badly that they put the word stress in quite impossible places and often even came out with quite the wrong word, and that I, the translator of an epic novel about a copper-smelting plant, knew only two words of Armenian: *che* (meaning "no") and *barev*.

I learned the story of mad old Andreas—but that is something I have already written about. And handsome, white-haired old Armo told me the story of his own life: his father had been one of the richest landowners in all Armenia, and Armo had been one of the most ardent Komsomol members in all Armenia.[32] This had created difficulties. . . . Some Turkish Kurds, who still remembered the old

days and who revered Armo's father, heard of his troubles and sent him, from Turkey, a present of five hundred rams. This was when Armo was already an important figure in the Armenian Komsomol, nursing in his young and passionate heart a hatred for all landlords and capitalists, for all enemies of the working people—and, at the same time, loving his father with no less passion, taking pride in his father's fame, in the way he enjoyed such honor and respect both on the Russian and on the Turkish side of the Araks River. But in the end Armo's father was buried in Siberia—nobody knows where.

Then I heard the life story of a sweet, asthmatic old man by the name of Sarkisyan. In a peaceful little house, together with his elderly wife, he is living out the last years of a life that has been anything but peaceful. When he was young, he was an important figure in the Party; during his years as an émigré, he knew Lenin. And then he was denounced as a Turkish spy, beaten almost to death, and sent to a camp in Siberia, where he remained for nineteen years.

And then he returned home, not embittered but convinced that people are essentially good, glad to have enriched his heart through conversations in camp barracks, north of the Arctic Circle, with ordinary Russian peasants and workers, glad to have enriched his mind through conversations with Russian scientists and intellectuals.

He said a lot about how, though reduced almost to the level of animals, people in the camps still felt pity for one another, about how those who were on their last legs did all they could to help others who were on their last legs, about how neither blizzards, nor temperatures of minus forty, nor national differences ever got in the way of human kindness.

He told me how his wife had come from Armenia to visit him, how she had made a home for herself in a filthy old hut just outside the barbed wire of the camp, how happy her kindness had made him, how proud he had felt of her, how much the other prisoners had liked her. He had retained the ability to laugh heartily and, as he told me the story of his two decades of confinement, he found things to laugh about.

He told me how in the main prison in Yerevan, eighty people had shared a single cell; all were highly educated—professors, old revolutionaries, sculptors, architects, actors and singers, famous doctors. It had taken the guards a painfully long time to count them, and they were forever losing count and having to start again. One day the guards had come in with a sullen-looking old man; he had cast a quick glance over the human mass on the bed boards and on the floor and then left. The same thing happened day after day. Eventually they learned that the old man was a shepherd. The prison administration had decided to make use of his phenomenal ability to count, almost instantaneously, flocks of several hundred, or even thousands, of sheep. This really was very funny—a shepherd counting a flock of professors, writers, doctors, and actors. . . .

He told me how, after returning from the camp, he had worked for a while selling fizzy water on Abovyan Street. Once an old man from a collective farm had had a long conversation with him while drinking his glass of water. Sarkisyan told the old man how he had been involved in the political underground, how he had helped to overthrow the tsar in 1917, helped to build the Soviet state—and then spent years in a camp. "And here I am now, selling fizzy water on the street!" After a moment's thought, the old man said, "But why did you have to get rid of the tsar? Was he preventing you from selling fizzy water?" As he told me this, there were tears of laughter in Sarkisyan's eyes.

From Ivan, the boiler man, I learned about an event that had caused great excitement among the whole Molokan community—about how two large families of Russian Molokans, the family of a carpenter and the family of a miller, had crossed one night from Turkey to Soviet Armenia, fording the Araks River. Their preparations had taken many months. The carpenter and his family had moved from Kars to the home of his friend the miller, who lived right by the border. They had learned the

ways of the Araks, which months it gets deeper or shallower; they had studied, in detail, the habits of the Turkish border guards. On a moonless night, the two families had gathered on the bank, had felt the damp breath of the river. The men set off first; the water was up to their chests and the powerful current pressed against them, making them lose their footing. The water howled and roared; round stones slipped and slid soundlessly under their feet, not wanting to bear their weight. The swift water seemed black and terrible, like death; the foam on its surface seemed no less deathly, a deathly white. The women followed the men, carrying their little ones. When they reached the middle of the river, the fathers took the children, lifting them up in the air; the water was now wetting their beards. But then the riverbed began to rise again. Astonishingly, in spite of the dark, in spite of being only just above the cold noisy water, the children were entirely silent; not one of them cried. The men then went back again, to help the old men and the young boys and girls across; both families were extremely large. When they reached the Armenian bank, everyone fell on their knees, weeping and kissing the ground, kissing the cold stones. The Soviet border guards failed to see them; it really was a dark night. One of the refugees whistled and a border guard called out. The head of the border post appeared and questioned the fugitives. He understood everything at once and felt deeply moved. His fellow officers all gathered there on the bank, and their wives joined them as quickly as they could, bringing dry clothes for the women and children.

There must have been something poignant about this nighttime return, about this meeting between a group of bearded Russian peasants from Turkey and a group of young Russian soldiers, about the weeping officers' wives throwing their arms around these Molokan old women and children on the bank of the roaring river. Ivan wept as he told me the story and, listening to him, I wept too.

Meanwhile, life in Tsakhkadzor went on as usual. . . .

In Karapet's restaurant shop assistants, teachers, and bricklayers gather to drink grape vodka, to sing songs, to lose their tempers, to tell scandalous stories, to eat kebabs, air-cured beef, *sulguni* cheese, spicy green beans and coriander, and then to drink more grape vodka and fizzy Jermuk mineral water.

There is much drunken boasting: Jermuk is better than Georgian Borjomi; it is the Armenians who first made *sulguni* cheese; cognac may be a French word, but Armenian cognac is the best cognac of all; no grapes are as sweet as Armenian grapes; it is the Armenians who first taught the Georgians to make shashlyk kebabs, although, to be honest, they still haven't quite got the hang of it.

Sometimes I hear singing on the village streets, and the rumble of drums: A wedding is being celebrated.

After a few more days, someone invites me to their home to drink vodka. And a day after that, I visit the library, and a lady librarian with broad shoulders and a mustache shows me an Armenian translation of one of my books. It has been read. Some of the pages are a little swollen; the edge of the binding is frayed.

What more do I need? On the street people greet me with a smile: *Barev*! . . . *Barev dzez*! People share their stories with me; they tell me about their lives, about their sorrows. Ivan has told me the story of the night crossing of the Araks—and this man I had thought of as cruel had wept. A villager has invited me to his house to drink wine and talk about life. A book of mine has been read in Tsakhkadzor, some pages are a bit swollen. It's all right here. I'm accepted; I'm one of them.

7

MY FIRST long trip was to Lake Sevan.

Sevan lies in the middle of a great scattering of stones. It is very strange—amid the stones you suddenly see deep-blue water. Sevan has nothing in common with the dry, stony earth—just as a bright faceted jewel has nothing in common with the black velvet on which it rests. The dry hills and mountains have been baked by the summer heat and winds, smoothed by the geological weight of time—and there amid them lies deep-blue water. Usually water and dry land are connected. Usually there is a gradual transition between them—damp sand, a squelchy, boggy, gradually descending shore, lush grass, reeds, willows whose leaves are constantly peering into the lake, as if they breathe not air but water. Here, though, the baked mountain stone and the deep-blue water are separate and equally self-contained. This blue water seems unearthly; it seems to have peeled off from the sky. Probably it is closer to sky level than to sea level. It even seems strange that fish can live in this cold, transparent, deep-blue water; what one expects to see, flying beneath the surface, are the birds of heaven. Admittedly, there are some very special fish in this lake—the silvery-gray trout, speckled with stars, that the Armenians call *ishkhan*, or prince fish.

A tunnel has been drilled into the side of the stone bowl that contains Lake Sevan, and through it the water crashes into a valley, driving turbines with its deep-blue weight, creating light and electricity. There in the valley the water loses its deep blue and turns gray or green; perhaps it is its special blue, its Sevan blue, that is transformed into electric light.

The whole of Armenia is awash with light. Villages lost in the mountains, the ancient caves of Zangezur, inhabited to this day—all are lit by electricity. These caves were inhabited for thousands of years before our era, before the rise of ancient Sumer, probably even during the Stone Age and the Bronze Age.

Most of these caves' present inhabitants, however, are working in factories that make precision instruments. These electrically lit caves now contain radios and televisions. Electricity is everywhere—in the action of motors, in electric trains, in music, in the changing frames of a film, in the smooth rotation of the telescopes on Mount Aragats. Lake Sevan is burning its blue body, turning it into light and heat. The water level in the lake has dropped by eleven meters; where there was once deep-blue water, there is now only a band of dark, murky stone. The lake is disappearing from its stone basin. Armenia, awash with electric light, grieves for Lake Sevan, which is perishing. There is now a project to redirect a mountain river and make it flow into Lake Sevan. But in the meantime, the deep-blue pearl is melting away, becoming smaller every day.

What will artists do if Lake Sevan dries up? I have seen any number of Lake Sevans in Yerevan—in the picture gallery, in hotel rooms, restaurants, railway-station halls, and public places of all kinds. I have seen Lake Sevan on postcards, in book illustrations, and in advertisements for food and industrial products.

What will Armenians do if they cannot come to Lake Sevan, if they cannot come and eat trout in the Minutka restaurant?

After yet another twist in the road, our car seemed to be soaring over the lake: We saw the snowy crests of mountains lit by the sun. They were pale blue, as if the snow had absorbed both the blue of

the sky and the blue of the lake. And there on a rough stone dish—a dish that was black and brown and the color of rust—lay Lake Sevan, deep blue, almost boundless.

On a humpbacked island, now joined to the mainland because of the drop in the water level, stands an ancient chapel, built with a simplicity and a perfection incomprehensible to modern man. According to legend, Princess Mariam built this chapel for a young monk whose beauty had filled her with awe. The air here is transparent and clear, and so, every morning, the princess was able to see the young monk from the windows of her mountain castle.

Goethe once said that during eighty years of life he had known eleven happy days. I imagine that everyone, in the course of their life, must have seen many hundreds of sunrises and sunsets; they must have seen rain, rainbows, lakes, seas, and meadows. But of these hundreds of scenes only two or three enter a person's soul with a miraculous power and become for them what those eleven happy days were for Goethe.

One person may never forget a little cloud lit by a quiet sunset, even though he entirely forgets hundreds of more splendid sunsets. Someone else will never forget a moment of summer rain or a young moon reflected in the pockmarked surface of a forest stream in April.

For a particular scene to enter into a person and become a part of their soul, it is evidently not enough that the scene be beautiful. The person also has to have something clear and beautiful present inside them. It is like a moment of shared love, of communion, of true meeting between a human being and the outer world.

The world was beautiful on that day. And Lake Sevan is one of the most beautiful places on earth. But there was nothing clear or good about me—and I had heard too many stories about the Minutka restaurant. After listening to the story of the love-struck princess, I asked, "But where's the restaurant?"

Nothing came of my meeting with Lake Sevan; it did not enter my soul. What is pure and divine in me did not get the upper hand. As if I were a base animal, with no wings of imagination, all I could think about was Sevan trout. Unfortunately, just as we were setting out, Martirosyan had poisoned me with the words, "They don't have trout at the Minutka every day." These words had troubled me all through the journey.

In Moscow it is impossible for an ordinary mortal to eat Sevan trout. Apparently it is sent from Yerevan on the fastest planes and then delivered straight to the various embassies. And the catch, in any case, is small. It really would have been upsetting to travel three thousand kilometers, drive to Lake Sevan, and then learn that on that day the Minutka had no trout.

Or was it the thousands of paintings I had seen? Were they what poisoned my encounter with the high-altitude lake? We always think of the artist's role as entirely positive; we think that a work of art, if it is anything more than a hack job, brings us closer to nature, that it deepens and enriches our being. We think that a work of art is some kind of key. But perhaps it is not? Perhaps, having already seen a hundred images of Lake Sevan, I thought that this hundred-and-first image was just one more routine product from a member of the Artists' Union.

I have to say that the paintings by Saryan[33] that I had seen in Moscow did nothing to help me sense the reality of Armenia. My own perception of Armenia is different. To sense Armenia's tragic landscape and its misty, ancient stone I found I had to erase from my soul the brilliant joy of Saryan's paintings. Maybe poetry and painting can be harmful. Maybe they can limit the soul rather than deepen it.

That day, however, the Minutka restaurant *did* have trout. This meeting, at least, really did take place.

The restaurant, a single-story wooden building with a terrace, stands a little above the lake, at the foot of a mountain. The plank floor in the vestibule creaks loudly as we walk in. We enter a large, chilly room. There are fifteen tables with white tablecloths. The windows look out onto the lake, but the room is somewhat dark—because of a covered terrace that goes all the way around it.

We go up to a serving table. There, under a glass cover, on round and oval dishes like ancient shields, lie marinated green and red peppers, fresh herbs, stuffed eggplant; beside them stand tall bottles of wine and cognac. This was the trout's escort, its entourage—its drummers, pages, and maids of honor. The trout itself was evidently waiting behind the half-open door. A few minutes later, a smiling gray-haired waiter took up his position behind this table, and a tall pale young man with curly disheveled hair came into the room. You could see at a glance that he was a poet.

The young poet was delighted, overawed, to meet Martirosyan. I was introduced. The two of them continued talking in Armenian, which I did not understand. But I did understand that they were saying something good and important. Martirosyan and I sat down at a little table by the window, had a quick look at the lake, and then turned towards the kitchen door through which the young poet now disappeared.

Martirosyan summarized the poet's words: They had a fresh trout in the kitchen. It had been caught that morning. They were going to boil it for us, in water from the lake. This would lend the fish a particular taste. We would be drinking cognac and Jermuk mineral water.

It grew quiet. The blue lake was silent outside the window, and we were alone in the empty room. The waiter from behind the serving table came up noiselessly and placed on the table a carafe of some yellowy-green liquid that looked like a young wine. Martirosyan explained that this was a special kind of wine vinegar, very soft and delicate. Then the noiseless waiter brought plates of salted peppers, eggplant, and fresh herbs. Then a bottle of cognac, which he uncorked. He opened a bottle of Jermuk, poured us each a glass of iced water, said a few quiet words in Armenian, and walked noiselessly away. We remained silent; we could hear the popping of the swift bubbles of gas in our now-clouded glasses.

We each sipped our water, tasted the fiery herbs and the still more fiery peppers, then gulped down more icy water. Everything was quiet. The waiter approached again. He inspected first the table and then us; he could, I felt, have been the organizer of a bullfight inspecting his bulls before releasing them into the arena. With the help of a napkin, he wiped a few nonexistent crumbs off the fresh white tablecloth and went back behind his serving table. We remained silent.

The kitchen door was noisily flung open. A short, very stout woman in a white gown appeared; she had black eyes and a pink face. Then came the sound of laughing voices—both men's and women's; there was a sense of restrained excitement. Then the young poet returned. Head thrown back, he held a large white dish high in the air; it was giving off clouds of steam.

Just as someone describing a wedding breaks off as the young couple enters the bedroom, so now will I—as the dish with the trout is placed on our table and Martirosyan pours out two glasses of cognac.

My meeting with Lake Sevan was a nonmeeting. I had no wings to fly; I was grounded by the trout.

8

AFTER a month of uninterrupted hard labor, we decided to have a rest. We went on an outing—"to have a feast," as Armenians say—in the region around the town of Dilijan. The road goes past Lake Sevan, across the Semyonov Pass, and towards the border with Azerbaijan.

With us we took a basket containing some bottles and some uncooked meat; Arutyun had slaughtered a sheep the previous day. "Poor little sheep!" Martirosyan had repeated, though it was he who had been responsible for the murder. Martirosyan has been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of sheep; he enjoys shashlyks. Volodya, the driver, has also stowed some firewood in the trunk, and some skewers.

We are going in a small coach with large windows. The first to get in are the two ladies: Martirosyan's wife, Violetta Minasovna, and Hortensia, my co-translator. They are followed by Martirosyan himself and by Tigran, the director of the House of Writers and the former secretary of the Party District Committee. I—the translator who knows only two words of Armenian—get in last.

Violetta Minasovna has beautiful gray eyes and is a fine cook. She makes wonderful Armenian chicken soup, stuffed cabbage and stuffed vine leaves, stuffed eggplant and peppers; she prepares peaches stuffed with nuts. She is kind and hospitable, but not without failings. Traveling with her is hard work; in her weak yet imperious voice she insists that we stop at every village shop, whether it sells food or clothes. She is obsessive in her determination to obtain some buckwheat, and she is also hoping to buy blouses and shoes for her daughters. She keeps criticizing her husband, saying his constant smoking makes it hard for her to breathe. I can't understand what they say to each other, but sometimes they sound vicious and I can see real fire in the eyes of the author of the epic about the copper works. It is the same burning fire as when he looks at a "poor sheep." As for Violetta's gray eyes, they are moist with tears; she is hurt.

Hortensia gets into the coach sideways, with the grace often possessed by stout women. The Armenian youths look at her with the eyes of young wolves. Here she is a fantastic success—unlike in Moscow, where people have mixed feelings about her gigantic bosom and legendary hips. Here she is esteemed—like Gauguin, suddenly idolized by the elite after long years of obscurity. Her success is intoxicating, but it also makes her anxious. Such is the price of fame. Hortensia's energy is immense. No flora or fauna on earth bears comparison with her—she is a female bulldozer, the daughter of an earth-moving machine. Every morning she "slims" with the help of a skipping rope; the entire house, built a long time ago by a rich Molokan called Slivin, starts to tremble. The earth around Vesuvius must tremble in the same way. Hortensia is impetuous, good-natured, straightforward, and cynical.

She cleans the shoes of her male friends, washes their socks and underpants, buys them apples and sauerkraut from the market, supplies them with medicines, is always ready to help the elderly by applying cupping glasses or even, if necessary, by administering an enema. She will give away all her money to a comrade or sit for a whole month at a sick person's bedside. She is a true Armenian, an impassioned patriot. But she likes Russian men. She is sensitive. She loves music, poetry, painting, and flowers, yet she makes free use of the strongest Russian swearwords. Strangest of all is that she is both amoral and endowed with real Christian kindness. Sometimes she says, very seriously, "I'll go and work, I'll keep hard at it till supper." And then she appears at the supper table, heavy with sleep, red-faced, radiating heat like a blast furnace; all afternoon the house has been filled by her powerful snoring. Sometimes she weeps—and her tears are like a tropical downpour. Usually this is

because she feels personally offended by something; she seldom weeps from pain, and still more seldom from pity.

Yes, how can we say that someone is good or bad? Are kind people always good? Can bad people be kind? Can someone be kind and still be a bad person?

Such are our ladies.

Now a few words about Martirosyan. More than anything in the world, he loves his nation. He adores it passionately. History, world literature, architecture, philosophy, humanity as a whole, the solar system, the Milky Way, galaxies, and supergalaxies—all this is secondary. What matters is the global, even cosmic, superiority of the Armenian people.

Sometimes this passion is touching and wonderful; sometimes it is sweet and funny; sometimes it is so insane as to be shocking.

Martirosyan is about fifty years old. He is tall, and he has a pleasant, intelligent face, with dark eyes and a large fleshy nose. He is a good conversationalist and storyteller; he is a gourmet and a connoisseur of fine cognac, a man who, in the words of Anatole France, loves to praise the Lord through his creations. And the Lord's creations are infinitely varied; they include not only the granddaughters of Eve but also the garlic soup called *khash* and the yogurt soup called *spas*, not to mention lamb-kidney shashlyks, pink trout, Jermuk mineral water, and the Armenian yogurt called *matsun*, not to mention billiards, stuffed eggplant, a house built from pink tufa on the shores of a gurgling mountain stream, the conversation of friends, sleeping compartments on international trains, and chairs on presidiums.

In the most natural of ways, Martirosyan has combined a cult of Armenia's marvelous architecture, of the Armenian landscape, of medieval Armenian songs, of the wisdom literature written on parchment in classical Armenian, with the cult of his own personality. He deeply and sincerely loves his own self. He reveres himself in the same poetic way he reveres the deep-blue water of Lake Sevan, the snows of Aragats, and the Ararat valley when it is pink with peach blossom. He is as dear to his own self as all the priceless riches of the Matenadaran manuscript library. He likes to tell charming stories about ridiculous situations he has found himself in, about enemies who have furiously criticized his books, about students applauding not him but a rival writer by the name of Shiraz, about how meek and docile he himself was during Stalin's day. But this is not self-criticism, even if it appears to be. On the contrary, all these stories are an expression of his love for his own self; they are stories about the weaknesses and eccentricities of God.

9

THE ROAD to Dilijan is very beautiful.

We drove along the shore of Lake Sevan. We passed the Minutka restaurant, but I did not even give it a glance. Our coach began to climb uphill.

How mighty, how terrible, and how kind is the power of habit! People can get used to anything—the sea, the southern stars, love, a bunk in a prison, the barbed wire of the camps.

What an abyss lies between the first night of passion and a long, grinding argument about how best to bring up the children! How little there is in common between a first wonderful encounter with the sea and trudging along the shore in the stifling midday heat to buy something from the souvenir kiosk! How terrible the despair of a man who has just lost his freedom! And then there he is, lying on his bunk and yawning as he wonders what will be in today's prison gruel: pearl barley or pickled cabbage? What creates this abyss is the power of habit. Dull as it seems, it is as powerful as dynamite; it can destroy anything. Passion, hatred, grief, pain—habit can destroy them all.

Nothing can withstand it. I am, now, accustomed to Sevan trout; I am even bored with it.

We drive through a village. There are boys standing in the middle of the road. They are showing us some trout, holding them up in the air.

"Let's buy a trout. We can make trout shashlyks!" says Martirosyan. Trout shashlyks would, of course, be a novelty. The steamroller of habit has not yet rolled over them.

"All right—why not? Volodya, stop!"

The young vendors thrust bundles of fish at us. The bodies of the dead princesses are still beautiful, but their eyes are blind and their mouths half open, twisted by the grimace of death.

"How much?" I ask.

"Twenty-five old rubles a kilo," say the ladies, translating the boys' reply.

My question is hypothetical. I am a guest and I do not have the right to pay the bill in a restaurant, to pay for a glass of fizzy water, to pay for apples in the market or even for a bus ticket, a newspaper, or a postage stamp. At first this embarrassed me; it upset and irritated me. But the power of habit is infinite, and I have already grown used to being unable to spend even a few kopeks, let alone an entire ruble. Now and again, however, my serenity abandons me. Have I been too quick to adopt this strange new habit? Have I even begun to enjoy it?

Surely, this isn't how I was taught to behave!

About thirty collective-farm workers are sitting by a stone wall. It is a weekday and still only morning, but there is no sign that they are constructing communism—most of them are clicking their worry beads.

Since the war, Armenian villages have begun to look different; the dark, cramped, smoke-blackened ancient hovels, part dug into the ground, part faced with large stones, are disappearing. Every year there are fewer of these thousand-year-old dwellings—and in many Armenian villages there are none left at all. After staying unchanged for millennia, these dwellings have gone.

First we inspect the new, bright collective-farm houses, and then the old smoky, stony burrows with bread ovens dug out of the earth; there is no doubt that the new, bright houses are better. We start to make our way back to the car.

The men gather around Martirosyan; they are talking animatedly. Then Martirosyan speaks. Armenian peasants are astonishingly good listeners. They look as deep in thought as if they were

listening to one of the apostles.

Martirosyan approaches the car; he too now looks animated. He tells us that nearly everyone there had read his novel; they had become so deeply involved, grown so close to the main characters that they wanted the author to change their fates. They wanted him to return one leg to someone who had lost both legs in an accident. They also wanted him to bring several dead people back to life. They addressed him as if he were a god, the almighty master of the world where the people he has created live out their lives. He is the master of their lives and fates. What a sense of exaltation! It must be a great joy to see your own creations become a part of the lives of the people you love. And people are kind: Martirosyan never gets asked to tear away a man's only remaining leg. No one ever asks Martirosyan to remove a general's Order of Suvorov and replace it by a Distinction in Combat medal or a badge saying "An Excellent Cook." Nor does anyone insist that a front-line soldier should fly into a furious rage on receiving an unctuous and hypocritical letter from his old mother. No one asks God to take it out on a responsible worker, who during icy blizzards and the dusty heat of summer, under the light of the moon and the light of the sun, never opens his mouth except to utter wise truths.

Yes, people are generous. What they ask for from God is indulgence and compassion.

Earthly gods—members of the Writers' Union, the Artists' Union, the Composers' Union—create a world in their own image and likeness.

Here we have Hemingway's world. And here—Gleb Uspensky's.[34] It goes without saying that these worlds are different. Hemingway describes people who adore bullfights and hunting for big game; he writes about Spanish dynamiters in the Civil War and fishermen off the coast of Cuba. Uspensky, on the other hand, describes drunken craftsmen in Tula, junior policemen, provincial bourgeoisie, and peasant women.

But these two very different worlds are not created in the image of a Russian peasant woman or a handsome and dangerous toreador. These worlds are created in the image and likeness of Uspensky and Hemingway. And even if Hemingway were to populate his world with Russian policemen and drunken Tula locksmiths, it would still be the same world, Hemingway's world. And everything there—the damp aspen trees, the muddy country roads, the dust, the puddles, the little houses, the gray sky of a Russian autumn—everything in this world would still be Hemingway's. And in Gleb Ivanovich Uspensky's painfully dismal world everything would remain painfully dismal—even the blue Spanish sky and the wonderfully handsome bullfighter eating young eels in garlic sauce and sipping Spanish wine.

How feeble and imperfect are the earthly gods who have created worlds in their own image and likeness—even such gods as Homer, Beethoven, and Raphael. . . . Here in front of us is a deep-blue world, the world of Roerich's soul transposed into paint;[35] everything in it—mountains, people, snow, trees, and sparrows—is a uniform blue. And here is a world of angles and rectangles; everything here—even the flowers and the young women—is angular or rectangular. Next to it lies Picasso's eccentric world, everything crooked and askew. Further on we come to a strange world of spirals, commas, and squiggles. And then we come to the misty, muttering, barely audible philosophical world of Boris Pasternak's poems.

There are worlds composed of nonsensical trifles that have great meaning, and worlds composed of apparently very serious matters that have no meaning at all. There are the worlds of the obsessed: the love-obsessed, the wine-obsessed, the war-obsessed, those who are obsessed with the importance of the square-cluster method of planting maize.[36] And there are those who constantly, involuntarily, think.

And then there are the worlds created by brilliant schoolboys; they want to re-create, to give wider

circulation to a world only one copy of which has ever been printed. They too are finding words for the miracle of a world; they are realists.

All of these worlds are alive; they are worlds created after a living image and likeness.

There are, however, gods of a very different kind—gods who are quick and obliging, waiter-gods, "What can I do for you?" gods. In no time at all they create worlds to order, according to the fantasies in some bureaucratic decree or a resolution from some ministry. Their world is inhabited by paper ghosts, by painted figures of cardboard and wax. It is a world of veneers, of tin and papier-mâché. These soap-bubble worlds are always full of harmony and light; they are worlds that have a clear purpose, where everything seems reasonable. But in whose likeness—we must ask—have they been created?

The worlds that the gods of pen, brush, piano keys, and violin strings create in their own image and likeness—these worlds may be full of imperfections and folly. They may be half-baked, twisted, distorted, confused, dislocated, wretched, and even ridiculous. They may be imbued with the charm of the primitive and naive, with a comic profundity, with the pathos of a child's toy, with a creator's vain yet engaging admiration of the subtlety and beauty of his own creations, with the blindness of suffering, with senseless hope. Sometimes we find the tedious monotony of a single color, sometimes an absurd and chaotic motley.

But there is, surprisingly, more true realism in the craziest picture of the most abstract subjectivist, in the silliest concoction of lines, dots, and spots, than in all the harmonious worlds commissioned by bureaucrats. A strange, silly, crazy picture is, after all, a true expression of at least one living human soul. But whose living soul can we sense in this harmonious, officially sanctioned world so full of apparently naturalistic detail, so dense with ripe ears of wheat and fine forests of oak? Nobody's—there is no soul in a government office. A government office is not alive.

Perfect worlds do not exist. There are only the funny, strange, weeping, singing, truncated, and imperfect universes created by the gods of paintbrush and musical instruments, the gods who infuse their creations with their own blood, their own soul. When he looks at these worlds, the true Lord of Hosts, the creator of the universe, probably cannot help but smile mockingly.

Obsessive scribblers, angry when editors reject their work, often say, "I can't understand why they turned down my manuscript. Only a little while ago the chief editor published a work of his own—and believe me, it's complete rubbish. No one could say it's better than *my* novel." Confronted by God's mocking smile, Homer, Bach, Rembrandt, and Dostoyevsky could say exactly the same in defense of their own creations.

After all, it is not writers, poets, or composers who created the soul of Eichmann or the sixty-below-zero temperatures of Verkhoyansk.[37] Nor did they create tarantulas and cobras, cancer cells, the insane holes and abysses of space, radiation that can reduce everything to ashes, malarial swamps, Siberian permafrost, and, not far from this permafrost, the blazing sands of the Kara-Kum desert. It is not they who are responsible for the general senseless madness of the universe.

We have the right to ask the divine mocker this question: In whose image and likeness was humanity created? In whose image were Hitler and Himmler created? It was not men and women who gave Eichmann his soul; men and women merely made an Obersturmbannführer's uniform for him. And there were many other of God's creations who covered their nakedness with the uniforms of generals and police chiefs, or with the silk shirts of executioners.

We should call on the Creator to show more modesty. He created the world in a frenzy of excitement. Instead of revising his rough drafts, he had his work printed straightaway. What a lot of contradictions there are in it. What a lot of typing errors, inconsistencies in the plot, passages that are

too long and wordy, characters that are entirely superfluous. But it is painful and difficult to cut and trim the living cloth of a book written and published in too much of a hurry.

And so we leave the village.

THE FIRST thing I saw in Armenia was stone; and what I took away when I left was a memory of stone. We do not remember every feature of a face, only those that best express the person's soul: severe lines and wrinkles, meek eyes, or thick slobbery lips. And what best expresses the soul of Armenia is neither the deep blue of Lake Sevan nor the peach orchards and vineyards of the Ararat valley; what expresses the soul of Armenia is stone.

I have never seen so much stone scattered about the ground—and I have seen the Urals, the cliffs of the Caucasus, and the Tien Shan. What strikes you in Armenia is not the stone of gorges, steep mountainsides, or snow-capped peaks. Far more striking is the stone that lies flat on the ground: the stone meadows and fields, the stone steppe.

There is no beginning or end to this stone. There it lies—flat and thick on the ground. There is no escape from it. It is as if countless stonecutters have been at work—thousands, tens of thousands, millions of stonecutters, working day and night for years on end, for centuries, for millennia. They must have used wedges and hammers to dismantle huge mountains. They must have smashed them into splinters—splinters they could use to build huts, temples, or the walls of fortresses. From what they left behind in this vast quarry you could make a mountain so high that the snow on its peaks would never melt. There is still enough stone to build any number of towers of Babel, from the one swallowed up by the sands three thousand years ago to the skyscrapers that buzz with activity on the far side of the Atlantic.

But when you look at these black and green stones, you realize at once who cut them. The stonecutter was time. This stone is ancient; it has turned black and green from age. What shattered the mighty body of the basalt were the blows struck by long millennia. The mountains disintegrated; time turned out to be stronger than basalt massifs. And now all this no longer seems to be a vast quarry; it is the site of a battle fought between a great stone mountain and the vastness of time. Two monsters clashed on these fields; time was the victor. The mountains are dead, fallen in battle. They have been felled by time just as mosquitoes, moths, people, dandelions, oaks, and birches are felled by time. Defeated by time, the dead mountains have been turned to dust. Their black and green bones lie scattered on the field of battle. Time has triumphed; time is invincible.

Sometimes this seems to be a strange and terrible kingdom where the earth engenders not life but death. Here, instead of grass, instead of dogwood and wild roses, black stones grow out of the earth. April and May give birth not to flowers but only to stone. Stone pushes its way out of the earth's womb, taking up all the space on the earth's surface; sullen, indifferent forces remind us that life's delicate muslin of fertile topsoil barely covers this dead cosmic globe made from heavy ores and fused rocks. Here we can see just how accidental and fleeting is the pale-blue and green earthly paradise. Here we can see the earth's profound gloom—without artifice or affectation, without any chorus of birds, without any eau de cologne of spring and summer flowers, without any dusting of pollen.

Here you walk among stones over a stony field. How strange, how very strange! Stone bones lying on a flat stone bed. There is no earth here at all. Your feet step across a polished parquet floor. It is black, green, or a reddish brown. It is smooth and slippery and seems even to have been waxed. Sometimes you think there is a piece of real black earthy earth there in front of you, but no—it isn't earth at all. It is a black stone floor. And then you see a puddle, a reddish-brown clayey puddle. No—

it is slabs of reddish-brown stone parquet. It is smooth and shiny; it has been waxed. I know the local stone-polisher; he doubles as the local stonecutter. His name is time, and he is invincible.

No Armenian artist, as far as I know, has ever adequately rendered this great deposit of stones scattered over a vast stone floor. How strange that Saryan—a painter best known for depictions of the joyful, festive chaos of flowering meadows and gardens—is considered the country's national artist. How strange—how sad and ephemeral—seem meadows and orchards against the background of this ancient people's tragic history, against these dead mountains that have been broken up and scattered over the earth! This mass of stone made me feel a great sympathy for the Armenians and the labors they have accomplished.

I began to think of this small nation as a giant nation.

I looked at Armenia's silent, implacable stone—and thought about all the fruit I had seen in the collective-farm market on the day I arrived in Yerevan.

Only a giant has the strength to turn stone into mounds of juicy vegetables and the very sweetest of grapes. Armenia's peaches and apples are rosy, but her mountain slopes are arid and her stone looks invincible. Only titanic labor can have given birth to peach orchards amid this hot stone; only titanic labor can have extracted grape juice from basalt.

As a young man I worked for some time in the Donbass. I was sent to Smolyanka II, the deepest and hottest coal mine in the entire USSR, with the most dangerous concentrations of gas. The main shaft was eight hundred and thirty-two meters deep, while some of the eastern galleries were more than a kilometer deep. I saw face workers, timber workers, horse drivers, all hard at work in the hot and humid depths of the Smolyanka. I was struck by the stark power of this vast boiler room, a boiler room that served the entire Soviet Union. Now, under the deep-blue Armenian sky, looking at vineyards and orchards in the midst of stone, I remembered the Donbass.

There were moments when I imagined that I could see hanging over the vineyards the smoky glow from vast smelters and blast furnaces, and that the stone of Mount Aragats was being broken up by pick hammers and the drills of cutting machines.

What an enormous, demanding, and highly skilled task! But it is more than that. It is evidence of man's daring. If soldiers are war's unskilled laborers, a man armed with a hammer, spade, or plow bears within him the fearlessness of a soldier.

The small giant advances, takes a swing at these two monsters—time and the mountains—and the stone of Armenia trembles and begins to retreat. The territory captured from the enemy, liberated from stone, and given new life by water continues to grow.

Water here is endowed with a special, magical power. It really is the "living water" of magic tales, water that can revive the dead.

And when you look at the water flowing along channels dug through sheer stone, when you see it spread out over the mountain slopes and turn into the miracle of orchards and fields, it seems that the peasants, workers, and engineers of Armenia have somehow abolished Newton's law of universal gravitation. Instead of running downhill, water seems to be clambering uphill; it is a mountaineer, always striding on, always striving towards the peaks, climbing up onto stone hills, grunting, puffing, and grimacing, obediently going wherever man, in his fearlessness, tells it to go.

Meanwhile the small giant tirelessly continues his Herculean labors. Streams of mountain water are transformed into streams of light; scatterings of dead stone are turned into houses full of the hubbub of life. A silk net, a gray silk network of roads, spreads out over Armenia's hills, valleys, and mountains.

It is man's nature to advance. The strategy of human culture is to take the offensive. Man attacks

marshes and he attacks the oceans; he attacks ice, diseases, forests, permafrost; he even climbs up into the sky.

Indefatigably and fearlessly the small giant attacks the arid stone of Armenia. The small giant drives water up the mountain slopes, and this water begets wheat and grapes out of the stone. He forces water from the high mountains down into valleys and strikes from it the fire of electricity. The small giant brings dead stone to life, and the stone becomes a living crystal; he turns lumps of ore into ringing bronze. He digs his way through the centuries and collects honey in the cool of the Matenadaran library.

Bracing himself against the crisp snows of Aragats, the small giant overcomes the murk of space. Drilling a hole through the bottomless barrel of light-years and parsecs,[38] he looks straight into the pupils of the universe. In the cloudless blue of the Armenian sky we can see the smoky glow of sleepless labor.

But the small giant does not just work; he also likes to drink and to have a bite to eat when he drinks. And then he dances; he laughs, shouts, and sings.

We came to a Molokan village. Suddenly we were in Russia again—in Penza, Voronezh, or Oryol. There were men with long beards and boys with blond hair. The boys wore their torn cotton shirts outside their trousers and their worn-out felt boots were far too big for them. The windows of the huts looked like half-blind eyes. There was something Russian even in the barking of the dogs and the strut of the cocks.

And then we were at the top of the Semyonov Pass, on the wonderful road that leads to Dilijan. Maksim Gorky traveled this road in 1928. And my aunt Rakhil Semyonovna traveled this road in 1941, after being evacuated from Odessa. . . . But this is not how one is meant to write literary memoirs. Gorky is a world-famous writer, while my aunt has nothing whatsoever to do with literature—her father, Simon Moiseyevich, was an insurance agent and his family thought him stupid and narrow-minded. And my aunt, I'm told, was anything but a brilliant student at the Lebenzon gymnasium, the secondary school where she studied in Odessa. She seemed to have inherited her father's obtuseness with regard to both literature and algebra; she seemed to have little in common with her mother, Sofya Abramovna. But Rakhil Semyonovna was greatly loved by all her family—she never complained, she was always friendly and welcoming, and she was extremely kind. She did not have an easy life. Her husband, an economist, was arrested for no reason in 1937 and died in Kolyma. Her son Volodya, who, when still very young, had been accepted to study microbiology at the university, was arrested and then killed in prison by his interrogator; he had refused to confess to the charge that he had been poisoning wells. Her daughter Nina, a remarkably sweet and beautiful young woman, committed suicide on the day that she graduated with distinction from the Chemistry Institute. Her youngest son, Yasha, who was in the cavalry, was killed at the front. And all her friends and relatives who stayed in Odessa died terribly; the Germans took ninety thousand Odessa Jews to the village of Domanevka and shot them there.[39]

This meek woman's journey to Dilijan is out of place in a literary memoir. Did she weep, looking back over her life as she gazed at the wonderful beauty of the mountain road, or did she smile wistfully and feel a moment of hope? Did all this beauty give her comfort and hope?

Does it matter?

I asked my companions to tell me about the great men who had traveled this wonderful road. It didn't occur to me to say to them, "You know, my aunt went along this same road in the winter of 1941." The old woman wasn't important enough; she was just one of many, an anchovy or sardine in a great shoal of anchovies or sardines. And, as you know, the biographical details of anchovies and

sardines do not enter the pages of history.[40]

We had crossed the Semyonov Pass. But the road continues through high mountains, making sixteen long turns before descending into a valley. Driving fast is out of the question—the road is narrow and the drop is sheer. Even Armenian drivers hold back—cars move slowly, decorously, like rational beings that fear for their lives.

Slowly and smoothly, wonderful vistas open up. They appear, float past our eyes, disappear, then reappear after a bend in the road. They begin to grow, to take on a more definite form, but now slightly changed, in a slightly different position. New, unseen miracles appear too.

Pine trees cover the mountain slopes. The trees are very large; the sun has not stinted its strength on them. The summits are covered by snow. Their outlines are smooth and rounded; they look like sugarloaves. That is, they look like sugarloaves to anyone over the age of fifty—it is already several decades since factories last produced those conical sugarloaves wrapped almost up to their peaks in thick blue paper.

What simple and frugal means nature uses to create a picture of extraordinary power. A calm and clear winter's day, snow on the mountains, pine trees. Some white, some green, some deep blue. . . . I do not know if it is the vastness of the sky and the infinite forest, or the stern peace, or the extreme purity of the colors (no white can be whiter than the white of this fresh mountain snow, no blue can be clearer, purer, and deeper than the blue of the sky above this mountain snow), or whether it is the breaths of smoke drifting about the valley, or all these things together—but the view has an astonishing charm, a simplicity, an inner wisdom.

A man looks at this clear silent world, a world of crystal peace and purity, and decides that he doesn't need the valley of everyday life, that its vain bustle is destroying his soul. Tempted by the great purity of the snowy summits, he imagines feats of asceticism. He sees a little shack in the woods; he hears the sound of a mountain stream; he gazes at the stars glimmering among the pine needles.

Involuntarily I began to think such thoughts. Life in the valley, after all, really is very bitter and turbid indeed. And I had inflicted a great deal of grief on people, probably more than they on me. It would be better for me to live on my own.

But while I was thinking about life on top of a snowy mountain, our glassy coach had made its way down into the valley. The road was now flat, and we were picking up speed.

Here the side of the road was covered not with snow but with liquid mud. These muddy puddles reflected the sun, and no one would have suspected it of being only a December sun—it was far too bright and warm.

We came to another village, and that was the end of my dream of becoming a hermit. The little houses stood among pines; the terraces and balconies around them were full of the lives of women, children, and old men. I tried to imagine the village at different times of day and as it changes over the seasons. And I found myself imagining this life very clearly: here in these little houses and in the shelter beside the village spring; during an April dawn; during a summer evening, when the men are singing, the cows mooing, and someone is playing the *zurna*;[41] during a sultry noon, when old men doze in the shade, click their worry beads, and glance at the young women going by on their way to the spring, carrying their pitchers and buckets.

Murderers with kind honest faces are dividing up the bloody body of a sheep they have just killed. A drunk staggers down the road. Here it is—the sinful life of the sinful valley.

And for some reason I feel a little embarrassed by what I have just been thinking. I remember Sasha Chorny's mocking lines:

To live on a bare peak, to pen simple odes
And requisition bread, wine, and rissoles
From those who live below.[42]

Is the life of a hermit really a manifestation of courage? Can there be courage in withdrawing from life? What about suicide? This too is a withdrawal from life. A retreat into being a hermit forever. Is suicide an act of weakness? Is it a cowardly escape? Maybe not. Sometimes I think that suicide is the very highest strength of a weak man. A man is weak; he has not lived cleanly and purely. And for the sake of his own lost purity, and because of his inability to live as he ought, he chooses to leave life. Is this weakness? I don't know. But it cannot be easy for a weak man to give up everything he possesses: borshch with haricot beans, wine, the sea, love, the spring sky.

Sometimes suicide seems to be a manifestation of something very different: the desperate act of a capricious person who is used to being spoiled. They cannot bear being denied what they want. And so they withdraw from life, away from their hurt at not being given their share of sweets, away from an irritation that has grown into despair.

Sometimes suicide is the logical act of someone with a great mind. While the stupid and the shortsighted crawl about in the mire of hope and optimism, he or she can see that in front of them is only a bog, a wall, or a precipice.

Sometimes suicide is a manifestation of blindness, of psychological limitation: all that can be seen is a wall. Someone falls into despair and is too shortsighted to see that there is a path, and a door, right beside them.

And suicide is often the consequence of mental illness. For alcoholics and drug addicts, amongst others, the sea and the sun and the green of the grass are obscured by a dry crust of anguish and pain.

These people die of their own accord because the world they live in has been made meaningless. And it is they who have killed it.

Sometimes suicide is loyalty to a cause. What does my own life matter to me now that the great cause I serve has been defeated?

Sometimes suicide is the betrayal of a cause. What does some great cause matter to me now that my beloved, the one I adore, has left me?

But I do understand at least one thing: Suicide is not just an act like any other act. Whether we are talking about the weak or the strong, suicide is a supreme act. Few people, weak or strong, are able to take this terrible step—this last, dreadful, voluntary step.

Twentieth-century hermits do not live in cells or caves; they do not live in the wilderness or in a hut in the forest. And so we imagine that there are no hermits left in the modern civilized world. Really, however, there are a great many of them, more than in the days when Christians were being martyred. Their cells are disguised; they are located in modern cities, in communal apartments, on the streets of Moscow and Kiev. And the hermits themselves work as painters and decorators, or in factories and ministries. They wear smart jackets, autumn coats, and hats made of Astrakhan fur.

But they too have withdrawn from the world. They too are desert hermits—like those heroic ascetics who, long ago, wore torn animal skins and shirts woven from dry grass as they sought for some supreme revelation.

Some of these modern hermits repent before God in the solitude of their cells. Some sing of freedom, love, and beauty in verse they compose in secret. Still others, like the monk in *Boris Godunov*, write chronicles. What unites all these different groups of people is that their worldly lives do not matter to them; what matters to them are their hours of seclusion, their lives as hermits. All

serve their god in secrecy. None aspire to return from the wilderness and tell other people about the illumination that has visited them there.

Our twentieth-century hermits illustrate with exemplary clarity two different qualities that laypeople have always detected in those who have chosen to retire to the wilderness; the laity see something sublime in the lives of hermits, but they also consider them impotent. There is a huge gulf between the fate of the hermit who withdraws from the world in the name of some secret truth and the fate of the prophet who preaches this truth. Communal-apartment hermits, especially, are always aware of this gulf.

A contemporary hermit never even thinks of stepping across this gulf, or anywhere near it. There are many hermits in our modern world, but few prophets and preachers.

Dilijan is a wonderful town. It is not on a railway line; no airport links it to the rest of the world. It is a hermit-town, at least to a degree. Mountains have protected it from modern forms of transport and it is hidden by forest. Its wood and stone houses stand on the slopes of a mountain, amid tall pines. Dilijan is full of silence; it is at once a town, a village, and a dacha settlement.

It is filled with peace. It has retained all that was sweet in a patriarchal past that was far from sweet. It is not hostile to nature; it has trustingly allowed the mountain forest to enter deep inside it. Town and forest live together.

Most of the houses in Dilijan are painted light blue. They are built of wood, but the forest does not seem frightened by this; the garden and orchard trees stand close to their tamed wooden brethren. Fruit in Dilijan is cheap—with no railway, little of it can leave the town. The apples are large, sweet, and juicy. There is a great deal of wine in the bazaar. Cool, cloudy, and opalescent, it is sold in bottles, decanters, mugs, and glasses. There are more sellers here than buyers.

Dilijan is a town you fall in love with at first sight. And your first thought as you fall in love is: "Yes, this is where I must come to heal my soul. Here I can find peace, tranquillity, and silence. Here I can enjoy the charm of the evening mountains, the silent forest and babbling streams."

None of this, however, is true. The young Lermontov was mistaken when he wrote: "Then the anguish of my soul is stilled. . . . "[43] The anguish of the human soul is terrible and unquenchable. It is impossible to calm it or escape from it. Quiet country sunsets, the lapping of the eternal sea, and the sweet town of Dilijan are all equally powerless before it. As for Lermontov, he was unable to still the anguish of his soul even at the foot of Mount Mashuk.[44] No outward tranquillity can save you from grinding anguish; no mountain air can cool you when flaming pitch burns your insides; no bloody and gaping wound can be healed by life in the wonderful town of Dilijan. Take my old aunt, Rakhil Semyonovna. Do you think she slept calmly and peacefully here, after being evacuated from Odessa? Or did she lie awake at night weeping? Was Rakhil not weeping for her children? Did she not "refuse to be comforted for her children, because they were not?"[45]

Now we are driving towards the border with Azerbaijan. To our right is a noisy mountain river. To our left are villages brimful of the rustic charm that is so pleasant to admire in passing and which the villagers themselves, in their obstinate determination to move to the city, value so little. Farther on are high hills, then craggy mountains. The forest has come to an end; the hills are covered with prickly grass that has been baked by the summer heat. The crags are precipitous, red or dark brown. But the country will soon flatten out; the mountains will disappear, yielding to the steppe that stretches as far as the Caspian Sea.

Martirosyan points to some steep red cliffs and says that wild bees live there. The cliffs are so steep that no one has ever managed to climb them, and the honey accumulated through the labor of countless generations of mountain bees overflows the crevices in the rock and pours down from

above. It is collected by the people who live near the foot of the cliffs.

We choose a place on the bank of the river. Volodya makes a hearth out of some large stones, lights a fire, puts pieces of lamb on skewers, guts the princesses, and washes their bodies in the river. Meanwhile our ladies spread out a tablecloth and place large pebbles along its edges. From their string bags and baskets they take bottles, glasses, fresh herbs, and flatbreads. The clink of knives and forks mingles with the noise of the mountain river.

We sit down around the tablecloth. The trout shashlyk is good; there are places where the princesses' charred skin has burst and you can see their royal pink bodies. I drink a lot, more than I am used to. But the cognac only makes me feel heavy. My head does not fill with spirit, with a bright haze. Fire does not run through my body; my fingers and ears are still freezing in the cold wind. My nose is running and, though I can't see it, I know it has gone purple. I eat and drink and keep worrying that the cold wind is making the women drink too, and that two bottles of cognac won't be enough for us all. At least Volodya isn't drinking—after all, he's our driver and it's a difficult road. But Martirosyan says something to him in Armenian—and Volodya laughs, nods, and downs a small glass. I drink a great deal, but the cognac has no effect. Sometimes this happens. Sometimes you drink a hundred grams and the world is miraculously transformed; everything—both your inner world and the outer world—becomes as clear as a bell. What is secret becomes manifest; masks fall from faces, and every movement someone makes, every human word, is filled with particular meaning and interest. A bland and boring day is imbued with charm; this charm is everywhere, it excites and delights. And your sense of your own self becomes equally special; you are aware of yourself in a way that is deep and strange. These fortunate hundred grams come your way most often in the morning, before lunch.

And sometimes you drink and drink—and become more and more gloomy, as if you are being filled with splinters of broken glass. You feel weighed down. A kind of lazy stupidity takes over your brain and heart; it binds your hands and feet. This is when drivers and mechanics start knife fights. They are in the grip of a terrible rage that emanates from the gut, from a soul overcome by nausea, from arms and legs gripped by anguish.

At times like this, you drink a great deal. You want to force your way into paradise, to escape from the clutch of this groundless despair, this disgust with your own self, the burning resentment you feel against your nearest and dearest, this crazy anxiety and fear, this terrible sense of foreboding.

And when you eventually grasp that the doors of paradise are closed to you, you drink still more. Now all you want is to stupefy yourself, to sleep, to reach the state that will make the ladies say, "He's made a beast of himself."

We make our way back in the sunset. The immense evening silence is something we do not so much hear as see. We see it through the coach's large windows. It is an ocean, and our small trembling vehicle is moving through an ocean of silence, barely troubling its surface.

When we began to climb the loops of the mountain road, the setting sun suddenly lit up dozens of snowy peaks and the sharp white light of day yielded to an improbable wealth of colors and hues. This was extraordinary, beautiful, truly wonderful—the quiet evening, the deep shadow of the valley, and pine trees that seemed black in the twilight while the mountains' summits and upper slopes turned blue, purple, copper, pink, and red. Each summit had its own particular light, and they all came together to form a single miracle, a miracle it was impossible to look at without deep emotion. In the presence of this excessive beauty I felt close to panic, even to terror. The snowy summits seemed perfect in their rounded contours, against a pale-blue sky, and their colors—vital and clean, simultaneously tender and bright like African flowers, hot, even though they were born of winter

sunlight on cold snow—filled the air with a music that did not infringe upon the deep silence. At moments like this, it seems something improbable is about to happen, some radical transformation of people, a transformation of one's whole internal world and of everything all around. Strangely and sadly, however, this expectation of a profound change engendered in me not only an unbearably happy excitement but also a very different feeling. I wanted this unbearable picture to fade away at once. I wanted these bright colors to yield to the calm of twilight and its dear, familiar ash: Let everything be as it was. There was no need for intolerable change. Let everything remain as usual. I did not want this liberating, bone-breaking newness that was tearing me apart.

This feeling must have sprung from the darkest and most fated—and perhaps most lifesaving—depths of the human soul. A terror shared by all men and all women.

Soon enough, needless to say, my pathetic desire was realized: The African flowers withered. Twilight set in. When we got back to our village, I asked to stop outside the restaurant. I went up to the bar, waited my turn amid the general hubbub, and said, "One hundred and fifty grams, three-star."

The Armenian barman did not know Russian, but he did, of course, understand me. After I had drunk my cognac, he looked at me questioningly and I ran a finger across the empty glass, just a little way up from the bottom. Once again the barman understood; he poured me another fifty grams.

On the whole, I had achieved my aim: I was now stupefied. When I got back to my room, I undressed quickly, so as not to fall asleep fully clothed, and lay down straightaway, so as not to fall asleep in the chair. Usually I opened the window at night—our good Ivan always kept the boiler very hot and I slept better if the room was cool. Sometimes, through my sleep, I would hear the soft plashing of the stream beneath my window. But this time I did not open the window. Perhaps because of the lack of air, or perhaps because my heart could no longer cope with so much alcohol, I woke up during the night.

Middle-aged and elderly brothers, all of you who like to drink, you probably know what it's like to wake up in the night after drinking heavily.

Silence. My heart is beating rapidly, anxiously, but I don't feel any pain. My breathing is not constrained, but my body is covered in cold sweat. All around me is silent. But the absence of any physical pain, the lack of any clear reason for my waking up, is in itself rather alarming. Something must have happened, but what? I want to jump up, to move about, to turn on the light, to open the window—but I feel scared of making the least movement. I'm frightened of coughing, even of looking at the clock on my bedside table. The close night air is filled with a sense of invisible dread. Any moment now, something terrible is going to happen. To ward it off, I need to move, I need to make a loud noise, but I also fear that the least movement I make—even just lifting a finger or turning my head—may bring this terrible thing closer.

When you wake up like this, after drinking heavily, you are seized by a feeling of terrible loneliness. Whether your wife is asleep beside you and you can hear the sound of her breathing or whether there is no one else in the room, you are alone and helpless.

At this point I realized that I was dying. My chest and shoulders were covered in cold sweat. My heart seemed to be beating separately from me; I was breathing evenly, but it felt as if there were no air in my lungs, as if I were breathing only useless nitrogen. I was overcome by mortal anguish. The horror of dying, of the end of life, grew from second to second. There was a terrible sense of lightness about my body—except that it was no longer my body, my only true home, the home of my "I." My body seemed to be forsaking me, abandoning me. Hands, feet, lungs, heart—all were leaving me. My "I" was no longer present in them; I could no longer sense my fingers from the inside, as I had felt them all through my life, but only from the outside. The indissoluble union of my "I" with my

forehead, with my ears, with my knees and my hairy chest had been ruptured. This was terrible. I was becoming something apart; my body was separating from me. I felt my pulse; I held my palms against my cold, clammy forehead, but there was hardly anything of me, hardly anything of my "I" either in these fingers or in the pulse beating beneath these fingers now denying my "I" refuge. Both the cold palm and the cold forehead beneath this palm contained ever less of me; with every second we were growing farther apart. The ineffable union of me and my body—a union in comparison with which the closeness between husband and wife, or between a mother and a beloved child, is nothing—this ineffable unity was being violated. It was as if a river, single since it had sprung out of the ground, had split in two, forking into separate channels, peeling apart into separate layers.

In the sultry darkness—though already almost forsaken by my body, which was still slipping out from me, still slipping away from me—I went on thinking with a terrible clarity about what was happening. I was dying. And what gave rise to this mortal anguish, to this feeling of death, which is so unlike anything in life, was that my "I" was still present, not obscured in any way; it was continuing quite separately from my body. And yet this rejection of me, of my cold clammy chest, of my pitiful damp fingers meant the end of me. It meant something unprecedented: It meant I was being destroyed, once and for all; it meant my death. I had been in those fingers, in those fingernails, in those armpits, in that snuffly nose. But now—and this was what was so terrible—I was no longer present in my fingers, in my armpits, in my navel. I was present only in some disembodied "I"—along with the ocean, with the Great Bear, with April's blossoming apple trees, with my love for my mother, with my passionate attachment to those dear to me, with my troubled conscience, with the books I have read, with Beethoven's music and Vertinsky's and Leshchenko's songs,[46] with all my sense of shame and my bitter resentments, with my pity for animals, with my hatred of fascism, with the elation I felt on first seeing the sea fifty years ago and on looking, only eight hours ago, at snow-covered mountains, with my memories of fights I got into as a child, with all the wrongs I have wittingly and unwittingly done to others.

And this incorporeal world—this incorporeal universe that had been my "I"—this was perishing because my fingers, my skull, and the muscles of my heart were peeling away from me, slipping out from my "I." A dark, stifling room was the scene of a cosmic catastrophe; an elderly man was dying, far from his loved ones, somewhere near the Turkish border. As he lay dying, he felt still more anguished because he was so alone. None of his loved ones were with him. There was no one in whose despair he might have found consolation, no one in whose soul, in whose tear-stained eyes his incorporeal world might leave some bitter imprint.

So I lay in a sweat, a passenger caught without a ticket, thrown out from a moving train with all my heavy suitcases. So I lay, watching as tens of thousands of suddenly useless, stupid thoughts, feelings, and memories slipped out from my tightly packed cases and baskets and flew off into the eternal darkness of winter.

I was dying, and I was slow to take in that my fingers had once again become my fingers, that I was once again inside them, that my heart was there inside me again and I inside it, that my "I" was back inside my lungs again, and that my lungs were now breathing oxygen. I was no longer outside them. A skull covered by cold clammy skin had once again become my warm dry forehead, the forehead I was used to. My body and I were no longer peeling apart; we had fused back into one, into Vasily Grossman. And it was still quiet and dark. There had been no sound of traffic, no noise at all. I had not changed the position of my body; I had not struck a light. But my anguish, my terror had gone. In the darkness, life had taken the place of death. I wanted to sleep, and I fell asleep.

All this leads me to think that this world of contradictions, of typing errors, of passages that are too

long and wordy, of arid deserts, of fools, of camp commandants, of mountain peaks colored by the evening sun is a beautiful world. If the world were not so beautiful, the anguish of a dying man would not be so terrible, so incomparably more terrible than any other experience. This is why I feel such emotion, why I weep or feel overjoyed when I read or look at the works of other people who have brought together through love the truth of the eternal world and the truth of their mortal “I.”

THERE are many old churches, chapels, and monasteries in Armenia. One of the most famous is the Geghard monastery, which is gouged out of a mountainside. This miracle born within stone is the fruit of thirty years of labor; it is the work of a man endowed with colossal talent and also with colossal faith. The man who hewed out this graceful and harmonious church also chiseled out, in classical Armenian, the words "Remember Me in Your Prayers."

A road planted with flowers has been laid from Yerevan to Echmiadzin, the small town that contains the official residence of Vazgen I, the Catholicos of All Armenians,[47] and also a fine cathedral, a monastery, and a seminary.

Mankind has been laboring on earth for millennia, creating many objects of spiritual value. These creations often amaze later generations with their elegance, their grandeur, their opulence, their complexity, their boldness, their brilliance, their grace, their intelligence, or their poetry.

But only a few of these creations are perfect—and these perfect creations are not remarkable for their opulence or their grandeur, or even for their extreme elegance. Sometimes perfection appears in the work of a great poet, but not in every line that he wrote. Every line may bear the hallmark of genius, but there are only two or three lines where nothing can be changed or added to, lines about which one can say, "This is truly perfect." A work of music, or part of a work of music, can also be perfect. A mathematical proof can be perfect—and so can a theory in physics, or an experiment, or an aircraft propeller, a machine part turned on a lathe, the work of a glass blower, or a jar made by a potter.

I think that ancient Armenian churches and chapels also embody perfection. Perfection is always simple, and it is always natural. Perfection is the deepest understanding and fullest expression of what is essential. Perfection is the shortest path to a goal, the simplest proof, the clearest expression. Perfection is always democratic; it is always generally accessible.

I think that a perfect theory will be understood by a schoolchild; that perfect music will mean something not only to people but also to wolves, dolphins, grass snakes, and frogs; that perfect verse can find a place in the heart of a quarrelsome old woman or a supervisor in a strict-regime labor camp.

Through its outward simplicity an ancient Armenian church shows that within its walls lives the God of shepherds, of beautiful young women, scholars, old crones, warriors, stonecutters—the God of all people.

You realize this the moment you see such a church from a distance. High on a mountain peak in the transparent air, it seems as simple as the thought of Newton, as young as if it had first appeared only yesterday and not fifteen hundred years ago, both humanly divine and divinely human. The church looks so simple and natural that you think a child could have put it together out of toy basalt blocks. I, an unbeliever, look at this church and think, "But perhaps God *does* exist. Surely his house can't have been standing uninhabited for fifteen hundred years?"

Only a pure, childish faith could have helped people to build these churches, chapels, and monasteries.

These churches are perfect, but I came to feel that the Armenians who built these perfect churches were not Christians but pagans.

That was my impression. Nowhere—neither in town nor village—did I see any believers; what I

saw were people carrying out rites. You don't hear or see a believer; you sense them. In Armenia I did not once sense a believer. I saw many old men and women in the villages—and I never sensed the presence of faith in them.

There are many ruined pagan temples in Armenia, but there is not one pagan temple that has been preserved. Not one pagan temple has withstood the pressure of two millennia. But the spirit of paganism has withstood the millennia; it has survived. This spirit—like the spirit of Christianity elsewhere—is not to be sensed in words, prayers, or sermons. I sensed it in the way Armenians drink wine, eat meat, bake bread, and perform rites; I sensed it in the way they walk, sing, and laugh. I did not sense the spirit of Christianity, even though Armenian churches still look splendid while their pagan temples are all in ruins.

Some years ago an ancient pagan temple was discovered beneath the altar of the main cathedral in Echmiadzin.[48] Excavations uncovered a huge sacrificial altar carved out of a single basalt slab. It was a flat dish, with crude gutters to drain away the blood, and it was massive; it looked as if the most powerful of modern tanks or tractors would be unable to move it. In the stony dark of this underground chamber you still sense a spirit of ancient cruelty. What victims were brought here, to this dark stone? Whose blood flowed down these gutters? The intelligent and enlightened young monk who had secretly let us into this temple smiled knowingly. What remarkable symbolism: a Christian church growing up over a pagan temple. When we returned to the cathedral, a stout priest with very black eyes was standing before the altar, baptizing a baby. He was holding the Gospels in his left hand, and his aspergillum in his right hand, plunging it into a massive silver font and sprinkling the newborn with holy water. In a singsong voice, quickly and indistinctly, the priest was reading from the holy book. His feet were directly above the black sacrificial altar; the scowling vault of the pagan temple had become the pedestal of the Christian altar. It is at this altar, decorated with a great deal of gold and the image of the crucified God,[49] that Vazgen I, the supreme pastor of all Armenians, conducts the most solemn of services. Generations of Armenian catholicoi, their bodies now buried in marble tombs beside the main door, have officiated at services and glorified Christ, little knowing that a pagan sacrificial stone lay sullenly beneath their feet.

But the spirit of paganism neither died nor went underground. It lives on in Armenian villages, in drunken songs and stories from the past, in the skeptical wisdom of old men, in flare-ups of jealousy, in the folly of lovers, in the simple-hearted but piquant judgments of old women, in the worship of vine and peach, in a carnivorous loyalty to the knife that cuts the lamb, in a glass of good cheer and in the arms of a woman, in the folk wisdom that has gathered thousands of years of experience not from a sacred book but from the hardships of everyday life.

The spirit of paganism lives on in ordinary village houses—where you never see an icon, where there is no humility, where the old men drink a strong homemade grape vodka and a cognac that is chestnut-gold—and it reaches to the doors of God's house. On feast days people bring sheep, cocks, and hens and slaughter the poor creatures by the church gate, to the glory of the Christian God. The yards of almost every church—both working churches and those that are now museums—are stained with the blood of sacrificial animals; they are strewn with down, feathers, and the heads of chickens. And then, not far from the church, the sacrificed animals are grilled or fried over coals; passersby are treated to sacrificial meat.

Paganism lives on even inside the churches, apparent in the crude materialism of the gifts offered to God by Armenian millionaires from America and elsewhere: massive pieces of gold, huge precious stones, silver baptismal fonts that weigh forty pounds or more.

The spirit of paganism lives on in books written on parchment a thousand years ago—books whose

authors not only discuss the delights of love but also suggest that the earth may be a sphere and that the universe may be heliocentric. These books are written in the language of a people that has existed for thousands of years, that adopted Christianity six centuries before the Russians but preserved the memory of the wisdom, nobility, and goodness of pagan nations from long before the birth of Christ. This memory has freed Armenians from religious intolerance, from cruelty and fanaticism.

True goodness is alien to form and all that is merely formal. It does not seek reinforcement through dogma, nor is it concerned about images and rituals; true goodness exists where there is the heart of a good man. A kind act carried out by a pagan, an act of mercy performed by an atheist, a lack of rancor shown by someone who holds to another faith—all these, I believe, are triumphs for the Christian God of kindness. Therein lies his strength.

All this is true. But I repeat: There are many ways through which one can recognize that someone believes in God. It is not just a matter of words but also of tones of voice, of the construction of sentences, of the look in a person's eyes, in their gait, in their manner of eating and drinking. Believers can be sensed—and I did not sense any in Armenia.

What I did see were people carrying out rites. I saw pagans in whose good and kind hearts lived a god of kindness.

We looked at the cathedral and at the offerings brought by millionaires from abroad. I was particularly struck by the improbably huge emeralds and rubies adorning the silver and gold vestments, by the weight of the precious bindings around the Gospels, by the crosses sprinkled with large diamonds.

The injustice of these splendid bindings was glaringly obvious—even to a child.

As we left the cathedral we saw the secretary to the catholicos; he was accompanying one of their frequent American guests. The secretary, a nondescript young man in a plain jacket, ushered his guest into a car—an Intourist Volga—and then came over to us.[50]

As always, I did not understand a word of the ensuing conversation in Armenian. For some reason it seemed entirely normal, rather than absurd, that a translator from Armenian should wait for the author he is translating to explain to him in Russian what has just been said in Armenian; I was, after all, a literary, not a literal, translator. Eventually Martirosyan explained that he had been asking the secretary to tell the catholicos about me and find out if he might be able to receive us.

We stood in the middle of the cathedral yard, waiting for an answer. I felt excited. Never in my life had I met a senior cleric, a patriarch. . . . And every first meeting is a source of excitement, whether with a new city, a new sea, or a person who is special in some new way. For me, of course, the catholicos was a new and special kind of person. But since people tend to be shy, and even ashamed of their natural excitement—as well as of many other simple and entirely natural feelings—I joked and laughed as we waited for the secretary to return, trying to impress on Martirosyan that I took meetings with church leaders entirely in my stride. As for Martirosyan, he was frowning; he too was agitated. Should Vazgen I refuse to see us, Martirosyan would be in an awkward position; it would look as if he had been boasting on the two occasions he told me how well he got on with the catholicos.

But then we saw the secretary coming out through the red arch between the cathedral yard and the patriarchal residence. In a monotonous murmur, he said that the catholicos was expecting us.

Martirosyan stopped frowning and started to smile; I stopped smiling and started to frown.

We walked through the arch and saw a large and pleasant garden. Amid the tall autumn flowers was a gazebo. I imagined the clergy gathering here in the evening, chatting away over their coffee. But I didn't have time to imagine what they chatted about; we were already in the anteroom of the

catholicos. I'd lost my sense of smell after my bout of flu, and so, unfortunately, it was only with my eyes that I was able to take in this room with its low ceiling, its walls hung with engravings, and its antique furniture that today's young people, were they to inherit any of it, would at once want to replace with something more sleek and compact. And the room, no doubt, had a wonderful smell of cypress wood, incense, hot wax, and dried cornflowers. I was as certain of this as the boy in the Chekhov story had been certain that the suitcases of his uncle the general were brimful of gunpowder and bullets.[51] But I didn't have time to ask whether the anteroom smelled of cypress wood; we were called in to speak to Vazgen I, the Catholicos of All Armenians.

His bright spacious study was full of beautiful and precious things—paintings and sumptuously published books. A stout man of about fifty, wearing a black silk robe, was sitting behind a huge desk piled high with manuscripts and books. His face was smiling; his kind dark eyes were smiling; his moist full lips were smiling from behind a salt-and-pepper beard. The simplicity of his robe was evidently a testimony not to his asceticism but to his sophistication.

We introduced ourselves, laughing and smiling. Martirosyan and I sat in chairs behind a small table placed at right angles to the large writing desk.

I probably laughed rather too loudly and smiled too exuberantly. There was no reason for me to seem so overjoyed.

A pale servant, dressed in a mouse-colored jacket and trousers, brought us small cups of coffee, delicate little token glasses of cognac, and a box of chocolates.

We watched in silence as the servant placed all this on the table. It may have seemed that it was because of the cognac and chocolates that I went on smiling so radiantly.

Standing not far from the catholicos was a monk in a black robe; his black pointed cowl covered most of his forehead. I had heard that many of the Echmiadzin monks are extraordinarily beautiful, but only now did I realize what male beauty can be. This monk was stunningly beautiful.

His beauty was not a false chocolate-box beauty; it was a demonic beauty. His shining amber eyes, his nose, lips, pale cheeks, and forehead formed an extraordinarily beautiful picture, but he looked haughty and proud. There was a sharp contradiction between his malevolent beauty and his pose of humility beside the catholicos's armchair.

The catholicos raised his glass affably, said a few words, and took a small sip. I conscientiously downed my own. Martirosyan, the author I was translating into Russian, translated the patriarch's words for me: He was glad to meet me and he drank to my good health.

We began to talk. I understood at once that I need not have become so agitated: The catholicos was in no way a new and remarkable kind of man for me. It would have been a new experience for me to be meeting a man of fanatical faith, a prophet, a religious leader whose inner life determined his every word, movement, and look. I had been alarmed at the thought of meeting someone who, after a single glance at an unbeliever like me, would divine how petty, vain, and worldly I am.

But I sensed nothing fanatical about the man I was talking to. He was intelligent, educated, and worldly. An enlightened worldliness was, in fact, his most striking quality.

We talked about literature. The catholicos told me that he not only read Dostoyevsky but that he had seriously studied him, that without knowing Dostoyevsky it is impossible to gain a serious and profound knowledge of the human soul. He said he had published a work on Dostoyevsky, but that he couldn't, unfortunately, suggest I read it: It had been published in Romanian some years ago, when he was bishop of Bucharest.

The catholicos told me that the writer he loved most was Leo Tolstoy. I did not feel surprised. The Church had once pronounced an anathema against Tolstoy—but everything changes.

Then he began to speak about writers who have discussed Armenians and Armenian history. I realized that he had not read any of my books.

He asked me about my own impressions of Armenia. I said something about the beauty of the country's ancient churches. I said I wanted books to be like these churches, simply made yet expressive, and that I would like God to be living in each book, as in a church.

But I do not think my words meant much to anyone except me. The catholicos listened with a gentle, indifferent smile. I looked at the monk standing beside his chair; he did not seem to be listening at all. Beneath his black robe I saw patterned nylon socks and fashionable brown suede slippers.

Then the catholicos and Martirosyan conversed in Armenian; I did not understand a word. But I think I understood something else. I understood that this was a conversation between intelligent, educated, and decent people who knew the ways of the world; it was a conversation between men who enjoyed a joke and who sincerely respected and admired each other. There was a rapport between these two men: this Party member in a fine suit, an art collector and wine connoisseur, with a pretty dacha and a deep knowledge of Armenian history—and this patriarch, a worldly and sophisticated figure with a European education and several telephones on his desk.

What these two men had in common was—paradoxically—how little either had in common with his predecessors. Martirosyan had nothing in common with the hungry, tubercular, ardent revolutionaries of earlier decades; and Vazgen, for his part, was certainly not the kind of man to go to the stake preaching the word of God in a state of joyful illumination.

These two men were representatives of two of humanity's greatest ideas: the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

I have often heard or read about people feeling anxious before meeting some great man. And then, the moment they come into the presence of Tolstoy, Lenin, or Einstein, they calm down, realizing that the great man is kind, straightforward, and considerate—and that he is not unlike other such people they know.

But this is not what I felt with regard to the catholicos. Discovering that Einstein is kind and straightforward has never made anyone doubt his genius.

Vazgen I, on the other hand, was clearly not a great man. I calmed down not because he was kind and considerate but because I realized that he was unremarkable. I had already met many people like him.

I sat there, full of petty worldly vanity, trying to memorize details of our conversation and thinking about my Moscow friends: Soon I would be telling them how I drank coffee with Vazgen I, the Catholicos of All Armenians, and talked about Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy with him. I might have been preparing to review a show.

We said goodbye; our meeting had lasted twenty minutes. The handsome monk in the black pointed hat escorted us to the car. He walked beside Martirosyan, talking and laughing. He was no longer on stage. And I thought about how I would like to be photographed with this monk against the background of the cathedral, that it was a pity no one had photographed us with Vazgen—and how eloquently I had spoken about literature and churches.

We passed a blind beggar. His face was full of misery; it was the face of Job. We passed a peasant walking towards the cathedral with a sheep on a length of rope; there was something terrible about the sheep's submissive anticipation of death. I looked at the handsome monk beside us; the god of kindness and compassion had not even touched his wonderful countenance. As we walked past the muttering old man and the doomed animal, the monk was still laughing.

Six weeks after this meeting I went to visit Ivan, the boiler man. I wanted to meet his father,

Aleksey Mikhailovich, a Molokan elder.

It was a winter evening and we were walking along the steep, snow-covered streets of Tsakhkadzor. Snow in the high mountains is different from other snow; it is lighter and fluffier.

Ivan was silent, and so was I. I was feeling depressed. Walking on fresh snow is hard work; I was starting to wheeze. We were walking down a long and very steep street, and I did not relish the thought of having to walk all the way back up again through deep snow.

Finally, stepping over a dilapidated fence, we entered a yard and walked past a small dog that barked at us without conviction. Then we went past some sheds thrown together out of rusty tin and old boards. I sensed the warmth of sheep manure and the smell of a henhouse. This smell remained equally strong even after we went into the dimly lit entrance room.[52]

Then and there, we seemed to leave Armenia. There was no longer any sense of the mountains, of the Araks River, of our nearness to the Turkish border. Everything was entirely Russian, as if from a Russian village: the floor beneath our feet, the half dark of the entrance room, the water barrel, the tin cup standing on a bucket covered by a piece of plywood.

We entered the main room. Dear God, there we were, back in village Russia. We were somewhere near Kursk, somewhere near Oryol. There was a large Russian stove and a perfectly made bed with perfectly smoothed pillows; in one corner there was a plain unpainted bench. Village Russia, southern Russia, where the Lgov region borders the Glukhov region, where Oryol borders Sumy, where Voronezh borders the Svatov steppe. Yes, at first I thought that there was something of the Ukraine in the walls bleached with lime, in the dirt floor, in the patterned hemp cloth on the wall above the bed, in the look of the entrance room. After a while, though, I realized that this was less a hint of the Ukraine than a hint of Armenia.

The Russian log hut. How much thought have scientists and thinkers given to it? Has anyone studied the paradox of its great diversity and its great uniformity, its constant evolution and its limitless conservatism? Has anyone written books about the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of kinds of Russian stoves? Here are the Volga stoves—from Kamyshin, from Saratov, all similar, as if in accord with some rigid mathematical law. Who remembers the master craftsman who created them all? Nowhere did he write, “Remember my name in your prayers.” Yet what quantities of bread, what a great deal of cabbage soup, how much living warmth his stoves have given birth to! And then the realm of Volga stoves comes to an end, and the realm of Voronezh stoves begins. Everything is the same, and everything is somehow different: the stonework, the chimney, the sleeping bench above the stove. Here a different master has created his own laws and expressed his own character, but he too never dared to write, “Remember my name in your prayers.” And now come the Kursk and Oryol stoves; they too suddenly take over, reign, bake their bread—and then, as if exhausted, no less suddenly abdicate. An invisible chieftain unites whole districts and provinces under the banner of his own particular kind of Russian stove, and then comes a boundary—and we find a new stove chieftain creating stoves in his own image and likeness. And so we come to the huts of the Far North—of Vyatka, Arkhangelsk, and Vologda.

And somewhere in eastern Siberia, in the very easternmost Far East, someone exclaims in astonishment, “But these are our very own Poltava stoves, our very own Volynia stoves, our very own hearths, our very own sleeping benches!” It is remarkable: After traveling thousands of miles in slow creaking carts, Russian settlers carefully re-create their own particular kind of stove. For hundreds of years they defend their stoves from the constant onslaught of other influences, from new-fangled modernist stoves, from decadent stoves, from pagan stoves.

And it may well be that the same laws hold sway in Canada or in Ukrainian settlements in Brazil—

the same laws for the construction of stoves, the frames of log huts, their roofs and entrance rooms.

Someone from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me that an old woman, a toothless half-Indian old woman in the Amazon jungle, anxious about her grandchildren, was once heard to tell her daughter-in-law to close the window in an improbable hotchpotch of English and Russian: "*Zachini vindovy, or childrenyata zasickuyut*." The stability of people's inner worlds, the stability of their forms of speech, of their habits, customs, and household utensils can withstand vast expanses of ocean, equatorial heat, and tropical jungle, the power of a vivid, noisy alien life that continues its attacks for decades and centuries.

Here in Armenia, I witnessed the extraordinary steadfastness of the Russian stove, the Russian hut, the Russian porch, the Russian entrance room.

Then I said to myself, "No, it's not a matter of stoves and cooking pots but of people's inner being. What matters is not the hut—what matters is that Ivan lives in this hut."

And yet Ivan spoke Armenian so well that the Armenians themselves envied him his huge vocabulary, his pronunciation, his knowledge of the nuances of village dialects, the wealth of Armenian catchphrases, sayings, and little rhymes he was able to draw on.

Martirosyan told me that Ivan's knowledge of Armenian was perfect. Ivan's friends were all Armenians; he drank with Armenians; he went hunting with Armenians; he ate Armenian soups.

But then we entered the hut, and I met Nyura, Ivan's friendly and beautiful wife. And sitting on the stove were Ivan's four fair-haired children—two boys and two small girls. The children were quiet and well behaved; their bright little faces all turned towards me. We talked about fairy tales. The children were able to keep up a serious conversation about Ivan Tsarevich, Ivan the Fool, the Firebird, Brother Ivanushka and Sister Alyonushka. And in the mountains of Armenia there was something especially touching about these children sitting on a Russian stove, about their quick eyes and flaxen hair, about our sweet and serious discussion of Russian fairy tales. They were splendid children—quiet but not timid. Ivan, standing beside the stove, was looking at them with a tenderness and love I had never before sensed in him. In my mind this hut, and Ivan, and his children, and the fairy tales of old Russia all became one; it was here that I first truly sensed the Russianness of a man whose father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all lived out their lives in the mountains of Armenia.

Then Ivan's parents came into the room—old Aleksey Mikhailovich and his wife, Maria Semyonovna. They were real old villagers. Aleksey Mikhailovich had gray hair, a dark weather-beaten face, and broad shoulders. He was wearing an old cotton jacket, a shirt with white buttons, and cotton trousers darned on the knees and tucked into canvas boots. And Maria Semyonovna had a wrinkled face, bowed shoulders, and large brown hands—a testimony to a long life of heavy and uninterrupted labor.

We all introduced ourselves and sat down at the table. Aleksey, sensing my curiosity about him, frowned and for a moment seemed rather shy.

But soon we were talking about matters that interested him more than anything in the world—love for other people, right and wrong, good and evil, faith and lack of faith.

And from his very first words, as I looked into his eyes and listened to his awkward, ungrammatical peasant speech, I felt what I had not once felt in the presence of the catholicos: I sensed that this was a man of faith, a man held by faith. I sensed this not from anything he said but from a sure intuition.

He was not trying to convince me of anything. He spoke with sorrow about people's reluctance to follow life's most important law—that you should wish for others what you wish for yourself; that

you should wish good to others without exception, regardless of their nationality, of their wealth or poverty, of their faith or lack of faith, regardless of whether or not they are Party members. If you don't wish yourself harm, if you don't do harm to yourself, then you shouldn't wish or do harm to others.

Aleksey Mikhailovich said all this with emotion, stammering, blushing, searching for words. There were drops of sweat on his face; he wiped his brow more than once with his handkerchief, but the sweat did not stop.

There was great power in his words; they were, after all, not the words of a priest in his church but the words of an old man who lived in a cramped and airless hut, an old peasant wearing a torn jacket and on whose shoulders lay the burden of daily labor. Neither this burden of labor nor any other of life's hardships had diminished his inner strength.

His old woman and his daughter-in-law listened to him attentively, and from time to time they joined in the conversation; like Aleksey, they cared deeply about people's goodness and the truth of their lives. And their faith did not exist somewhere outside their everyday life; it had itself become their everyday life. It was one with the borshch they cooked, with the clothes they washed, with the bundles of wood they fetched from the forest—with everything in their long hard lives.

And there was no trace in Aleksey's words—which the women concurred with and which Ivan and the silent children on the stove were so alertly absorbing—of any kind of religious obsessiveness or spiritual grandiosity. They were just simple words about the need to feel pity for others and to wish for them what you would wish for yourself. They were words from life, not words from a sermon—words from the life these people lived here in this hut and the work they did day after day.

Nor was there anything conceited or hectoring about these words. There was only sadness, a sadness that no matter how simple everything may really be, people are unable to live well, according to the law of goodness and truth, but constantly fall away from this ideal.

I remember clearly how Aleksey, when he referred to lies, gossip, and all kinds of human wickedness, never condemned anyone but just said very quietly, with a frown, "It's not necessary. No, there's really no need for it."

Then Ivan and I had some vodka together. With it we had some pickled cucumber, some *khash*, and some boiled chicken. But all Nyura gave Aleksey Mikhailovich was tea and bread. He drank and ate this almost guiltily, as if rather than being proud of his godliness, he was ashamed to be revealing it to others.

I asked him what he thought about the killing of animals, and he replied, "What can I say? It seems people can't manage without it, but to go hunting for fun—no, it's not necessary. There's really no need for it."

He looked at his son, sighed, and said, "My Ivan's a cruel man."

And Ivan said nothing. He too let out a sigh.

The longer we talked, the more moved I felt. I was not being inquisitive. I was not making mental notes of trivial details. I was gripped by a feeling I had not expected.

Meetings with famous people can—as we have seen—be disappointing. Someone very gifted, even a true genius, can turn out to be a very ordinary person indeed. His talent is separate from his soul. And you immediately cease to care that this ordinary, mediocre man is endowed with some particular talent that he displays elsewhere—in a laboratory, in an operating theater, on a grand stage, or in something he writes.

It is worse still when someone knows he is expected to display certain unusual qualities and knows that he does not possess these qualities; he begins to pretend, to play games, to act the prophet. This,

of course, happens not with geniuses but with second-rate talents.

And then there are meetings like mine with the catholicos: Someone turns out to be intelligent, enlightened, and pleasant, but not of the caliber one had expected.

My experience today could not have been more different.

First there had been the steep streets deep in snow. This had been hard going, all the more so because of my shortness of breath, and I had felt cross with myself for agreeing to go and see Ivan and his father. It had all begun to seem pointless and tedious: I'd have done better to stay in the Writers' Union house, play a game of billiards, and glance at the journal *In Foreign Parts*.

Next the Russian stove; the fair-haired children; my thoughts about the Russian character and how perfectly a log hut expressed the steadfastness of a Russian peasant who spoke Armenian as eloquently as the most golden-tongued of Armenians.

Then I had sat at table with an old, semiliterate man in a dirty jacket and canvas boots and felt in my heart an excitement I had seldom known.

By then Armenia and Russia no longer seemed to matter. I was no longer thinking about the nature of greatness or the characteristics of a particular nation. There was only the human soul, the soul that did not lose faith as it suffered anguish and torment among the scree and vineyards of Palestine, the soul that remains equally human and good in a little village near Penza, under the sky of India, and in a northern yurt—because there is good in people everywhere, simply because they are human beings.

This soul, this faith was alive in a semiliterate old man, and it was as simple as his life and his daily bread, without a single high-flown word or moment of lofty preaching. Reaching out to his faith, touching it and sensing its power, was enough to bring tears to my eyes, because I suddenly realized that it was less about God than about people. I understood that Aleksey could not live without this faith, just as he could not live without bread and water, and that, for the sake of his faith, he would not hesitate to subject himself to the torment of the Cross, or to the most terrible and unending penal servitude.

The gift possessed by a great poet or scientist is not the highest of gifts. Among even the most brilliant virtuosos of the mathematical formula, of the musical phrase and poetic line, of the paintbrush and chisel are all too many people who are weak, petty-minded, greedy, servile, venal, and envious—people like slugs or mollusks, moral nobodies in whom, thanks to the irritating pangs of conscience, a pearl is sometimes born. But the supreme human gift is beauty of soul; it is nobility, magnanimity, and personal courage in the name of what is good. It is a gift possessed by certain shy, anonymous warriors, by certain ordinary soldiers but for whose exploits we would cease to be human.

I HAD BEEN invited to a wedding—one of Martirosyan's nephews was getting married. This nephew worked as a driver; his bride worked in a village shop. We had a long way to go, to the Talin region, on the southern slope of Mount Aragats.

I had been uncertain whether to go—I'd had a pain in my belly since the previous evening, and like a swimmer with little confidence in his own strength, I was nervous of swimming far from shore. But when the phone rang in the morning and Martirosyan told me that he was waiting for me outside, together with his wife and Hortensia, I decided to be bold.

Soon we were on the main road. We were going to have breakfast in our glassy coach—Martirosyan had not had time to eat anything at home. Afraid of disturbing the now-dozing beast in my belly, I did not touch the food; I just sipped a little coffee from the thermos.

The Ararat valley was to our left; we could see both the Greater and the Lesser Ararat. And to our right stretched the snow-covered slopes of Mount Aragats. The road ran through fields of stone—the bones of dead mountains.

A road is always interesting. I think that movement makes any road interesting. I do not know any uninteresting roads. Our road took us not only through space but also through time—we drove past silent thousand-year-old churches and chapels, past the lifeless ruins of a once-bustling caravansary, past villages bristling with television antennae, past labor-camp barracks festooned with cheery and optimistic slogans. We saw the mountain where Noah found refuge after the flood, and turning our heads in the opposite direction, we saw the mountain from which Ambartsumyan's[53] telescopes are now exploring the structure of distant universes.

The stones scattered about in the valley were a reminder to Ararat and Aragats that everything passes: These overthrown stones were once mighty mountains with white crowns; now they are dead skeletons.

Nowhere else in Armenia, perhaps, have I seen such a stony desolation, impossible to escape from, as in the high valleys of Mount Aragats. I have no idea how to convey this improbable feeling. In three dimensions—height, width, and depth—stone, nothing but stone. No, there were more than three dimensions of stone; these stones were also an expression of the world's fourth coordinate—time. The migrations of peoples, paganism, the ideas of Marx and Lenin, the wrath of the Soviet state had all found expression in this stone, in the basalt walls of churches, in gravestones, in elegantly built new clubs, in schools and palaces of culture, in quarries and mines, in the stone walls of labor camps.

Soon, however, all we could see was the overthrown stone of the valleys. Nothing remained of the Christian myth, expressed through the stone of churches, about a future happiness in the Kingdom of Heaven, nor did anything remain of the stone quarries and mines developed in the name of a future terrestrial bliss.

And when it became clear that before us lay nothing but the stone bones of long-dead mountains, we drove into the village where a young driver was getting married to a pretty young girl who worked in the village shop.

I had been told that the villages around Aragats were the poorest in Armenia, that they had languished until only recently under a heavy burden of senseless taxes. Bureaucrats had expected the collective farms to produce large quantities of meat, wool, and grapes from the thousands of stone fields around these farms. But you can't press wine from stone; you can't turn basalt into good mutton.

These taxes had been lifted. Now the collective farms were responsible only for their small patches of fertile land. Life was a little less difficult, but people were still far from rich.

Our glassy coach drove slowly down the stone street of a stone village, amid stone hovels that had not only grown up out of the stone but also grown down into it. Stone walls stretched from one hovel to another. Long channels for watering the animals had been gouged out of huge stone slabs. Near the huts stood basalt water barrels, basalt laundry tubs, basalt troughs for feeding the sheep.

Hearths were carved out of stone. Stairs, porches—everything was stone. Both people's homes and their household utensils were basalt. Here, we were still in the Stone Age. Even the dust being blown down the street seemed stony.

But music from a radio reminded us that the age of electricity had, in fact, dawned. Along the stone streets stood stone pillars, carrying wires to the Stone Age hovels, bringing them electric lighting. And we could hear the heartrending voices of wedding flutes: Yes, people were living amid these stones.

We drove up to some little houses, standing above a stone precipice, that looked particularly poor. We were expected. A drum was beating, and there was the sound of flutes.

The groom's mother, a tall old woman with an emaciated face, hugged Martirosyan. They kissed and began to weep. They were weeping not because a young man was marrying and leaving his mother but because of the incalculable loss and suffering that Armenians have endured, because they couldn't not weep for relatives of theirs who had perished during the massacres of 1915, because no joy in the world could make them forget their nation's grief and their homeland on the other side of Mount Ararat. But the drum went on thundering deafeningly and victoriously. The expression on the face of the large-nosed drummer was implacably merry: In spite of everything, life would go on, the life of a nation making its way through a land of stone.

A crowd of peasants gathered around us. Martirosyan introduced me to his sister and her husband—a thin old man in a green tunic; his soldier's belt was fastened by a brass buckle and a five-pointed star. He had sad eyes and his dress indicated real poverty. But the buckle and star shone in the sun; they must have just been polished. I shook dozens of hands, everyone wanted to meet the friend of Martirosyan the writer.

There was a table outside. We were led out and offered food and drink.

Unfamiliar customs and rituals demand respect. I always feel fear, even terror at the thought that I might offend people by failing to honor some custom of theirs. What would the villagers think if I refused food and drink offered to me by the groom's parents?

I drank a glass of grape vodka and ate some green pepper and a piece of mutton. Anxious not to offend, I drank a second glass of vodka and ate some pickled green tomato. This was so fiery that I immediately needed another swig of vodka. This is how people drink in Armenia—they extinguish the fire of vodka with the fire of pepper; they extinguish the fire of pepper with the fire of vodka.

After my stomach troubles during the night, the vodka had an unaccustomed but wonderful effect. A sculptor, I imagine, can achieve something similar with a piece of stone: everything superfluous splits off and falls away. His chisel releases a life that had been hidden.

My perception of the world became altogether different and more wonderful. I made a great leap forward; I saw faces lit not only by the light of the sun but also by their own inner glow. I could read people's true characters. My love and trust in people increased exponentially. I had moved from the auditorium to the stage. No longer did anything seem banal or merely habitual. I seemed to be taking part for the first time in a splendid and solemn, perfectly structured one-act drama—the drama of *life*. I was full of excitement and surprise: The sky above me was such a deep blue, the air so cool and

clean, the snow on the mountaintops so brilliant! And there was such joy—and such sorrow—in the wedding music! The people gathered around the house of the groom's parents entered unhindered into my soul; there was a place for them in its innermost depths. I could feel their immense labor, the poverty of their clothes and shoes, their wrinkles, their gray hair, the youthful mocking curiosity of the beautiful—and not so beautiful—young women, the mighty souls and wonderful straightforwardness of the laborers. I sensed their honesty; I understood the hardship of their lives, their kindness, how well disposed they were towards me. I was at home; I was among my own kind. We entered a stone room—what stern poverty! How good to be honest and poor! The walls, ceiling, and floor were all made from large stones. The ancient utensils had barely even been touched by the Iron Age; the jugs and dishes, the containers for grain, oil, and wine, the hearth itself—all seemed the very image of the Stone Age.

We went out again into the yard. Straight in front of me, shining in the sun, was the snowy peak of Greater Ararat. My feelings and thoughts became still more acute.

Humanity's most important mountain—the mountain of faith

—called up innumerable associations in my mind. The Bible and the present day came together with astonishing ease, and I saw Mount Ararat through the eyes of people who lived on these mountain slopes before the birth of Christ. I saw the swift black waters of the great flood. I saw drowning sheep and donkeys. I saw a blunt-nosed boat, floating heavily on the water. I saw the animals saved by Noah and the bloody slaughterhouses where Noah's descendants killed the descendants of these animals. But I did not only *think* about the biblical mountain; I also, without thinking, delighted in its beauty. The mountain was shining in its full glory; it was not obscured by the buildings of Yerevan, by the smoke of its factory chimneys or the clouds and mist of the Ararat valley. From its stone foot to its white head it was lit by the morning sun. It belonged to today and to the life of past millennia. It brought together today's wedding and the flutes of three thousand years ago. Everything passes; nothing passes. . . .

What power lies in wine!

People hurried us on: We still had to go and fetch the bride, and it was eighteen kilometers to her village. The wedding procession consisted of two trucks and our glassy coach. The young stood in the back of the trucks. They danced, sang, and waved roasted chickens in the air—as well as round loaves of wheat and skewers of lamb shashlyk. Gleaming in some of their hands were captured German daggers; their blades, on which could be seen the words "*Alles für Deutschland*," had been plunged into fresh apples.

The flutes sang out shrilly and the drums drummed on, but there was no one to admire the splendor of the wedding convoy—around us was only stone, flat, blind, and deaf. This wilderness of sullen stone was a challenge; it lent a particular power to our merriment. The human race was going to continue—our wedding flutes and drums were making fun of the sullen stone.

But about halfway between the groom's village and the bride's, just as on my first day in Yerevan, I was hurled down to earth from the heights of contemplation.

This time, however, things were a great deal worse. This time, I was not alone; I was a guest at a wedding. I knew I was being watched, albeit in the friendliest of ways, by the other people in the coach; they noticed every movement I made. And in the bride's village they would be waiting impatiently: We were running very late. The tables would have been set long ago, and I knew that the moment we drew up outside the bride's house, we would be surrounded by a huge crowd of her friends and relatives, and we would be ushered solemnly inside, to the sound of wedding music.

I was not going to reach the bride's village without mishap. A terrible force was raging in my

bowels; it was no longer subject to my pitiful will. A tiger with iron claws was determined to burst out of his cage, and it was impossible to resist this enraged beast. The pickled tomatoes and cucumbers had done their work. I was powerless, as powerless as if I had been trying to bridle my heart or my lungs or to prevent the eruption of a volcano. I was gripped, O God, by a terrible despair, by a wild, animal terror. A cold deathly sweat covered me from head to foot. My mind was working with insane speed. Should I stop the coach? It would be very awkward to make such a request—and anyway, what good would it do me? All around was a wilderness of stone, flat as an executioner's block. And the coach was all windows, and behind us were two trucks full of young people, all singing away.

I have experienced horror and terror more than once in my life, not to mention fear and confusion. I took part in the war. I crossed the Volga under German fire, several times. I have experienced both massive bombing raids and barrages of mortar and artillery fire.

And yet, even though both during the war and at other times I have experienced my fill of fear, I have never—strange as this may seem—felt such utter horror as on that wedding coach. Dear God—and all to the accompaniment of continual music! And in the company of dozens of kind, friendly, respectable people, all so very proud that the Moscow friend of Martirosyan the writer was attending this wedding. If only I'd had a gun. . . . But no. In spite of everything, I probably wouldn't have shot myself. I would have gone on living with the burning, unprecedented shame of it all. I would have become a figure of fun, a hero of the folklore of filth—but I wouldn't have shot myself. Years later, a decrepit and gray-haired old man, remembering the horrible, pathetic, humiliating details of that day, I would have cried out in shame. In the middle of the night I would once again have been drenched in cold sweat; I would have groaned; I would have clutched my head in my hands. Nevertheless, I wouldn't have killed myself. Dear God, and all to the sound of wedding drums and ancient flutes, and at the foot of the biblical Mount Ararat! Could I have ever imagined such torment?

My companions evidently noticed my tense face. I had probably gone deathly pale; probably they could see the sweat on my forehead and cheeks. Someone asked me in broken Russian: Was I comfortable? Was it too hot for me? Would I prefer to sit in front? In reply, I mumbled something inarticulate—I don't remember what.

And then, turning to the passengers, Volodya the driver said something in Armenian. Someone interpreted: We would have to turn off the road for a moment. We needed to stop at a garage for oil. How we reached the gates of this garage I do not remember. I got out of the coach and the first thing I saw was a little building, a tin shack—a cubicle, a water closet, a WC, a lavatory, a latrine, my sweet savior, my sunshine. And I managed to make my way to this booth with a slow and stately gait.

It was, of course, all rather unfortunate. No one got out except me. Volodya's mates brought him his can of oil with lightning speed —he was, after all, getting married, and he was a driver, one of *them*. Then, mischievously, Volodya twice sounded his horn. What on earth could have happened to me? Had I fallen into a swoon? Had I even died there in the tin palace? Martirosyan got off the coach and set off in search of me. Just as he reached the palace with a single seat, I emerged. Both of us rather embarrassed, we made our way quietly and thoughtfully back to the coach.

My respectable fellow passengers—the chairman of the collective farm, a dear, rather stout old pensioner who was a Party member, two supervisors from the district centers and their intelligent and elderly wives—greeted me with compassionate silence. When I disappeared into the little palace, they had, no doubt, joked, laughed, and exchanged knowing looks. But never mind—things could have been a great deal worse.

I did not feel the happiness I had felt after my troubles that first day in Yerevan. My ordeal had left

me exhausted. Damp with sweat, barely breathing, I was like someone who has just been carried out of an operating room. I had no thoughts, no feelings, only a vague consciousness of having been saved.

We were back on the main road, halfway between the two villages. I had been lucky, very lucky indeed. Glancing shyly at my companions, listening to their quiet conversations, I realized that I had managed to avoid disgrace.

I remembered a Moscow writer who disliked me. He had once said that he thought losers were a pathetic breed and that, in his opinion, I was a typical loser—a typical example of the eternal literary loser. He must have been wrong, I thought. After all, what had just saved me from catastrophe was a stroke of extraordinary good fortune. This was true, of course. But then, if each of us is allotted a limited quantity of luck and good fortune, could it not be said that I had squandered my share in the most pitiful of ways? Today's success, after all, had hardly brought me wealth and glitter; it had hardly brought me worldwide fame. . . .

We drive into the bride's village. Little boys straight from the paintings of Murillo—little boys with black eyes and black curls—are running after our vehicles. The young men and women in the trucks behind us are now making more noise than ever. This is a ritual wedding merriment, the counterpart of the ritual tears at a funeral. There are moments when the merry faces look gloomy and preoccupied. These people's merriment, like their daily labor, is excessive; it is an effort for them.

Now, from a distance, we see a large crowd blocking the street; we are approaching the bride's home. Music is playing. All we need are cameramen and press photographers—then we would look like a delegation from a friendly country arriving in Moscow by plane. Old men greet us warmly; they seize us by the hand, clasping our hands between their own. The tom-toms beat on.

And now we enter the bride's home. It is a very poor house. Walls, windows, everything here bears the signature of poverty. It is a particular kind of poverty—a village poverty, an Armenian poverty, a pure mountain poverty. And this background of poverty lends a particularly festive look to the tables placed along the walls and zigzagging out into the spacious room. On the tables are dozens of bottles and decanters full of cloudy white wine and yellowish grape vodka. On the tables are vegetables, fish, roast lamb, spicy breads, and nuts.

But here, in the bride's home, I break with custom—I do not eat or drink. The respectable people sitting next to me look at me with sad surprise and mild reproach: Everyone is drinking to the health of the bride's mother, to the health of the bride's father, to the young couple—and I am not. I am not drinking because I have known a greater fear than that of violating customs and rituals. I do not want to approach the edge of the abyss a second time.

The bride and groom are sitting side by side. They rise to their feet for every toast. The groom is wearing a new checkered coat and checkered cap. He has a large nose and his face is red and weather-beaten, rather coarse. On one sleeve he has the red armband of a volunteer assistant policeman.

The bride is very pretty. Her long eyelashes half cover her eyes, which are looking down at the ground. When someone addresses her, she says nothing and continues to look down at the ground. On her head sits a crown with a white veil. Like the groom, she is wearing a coat. Her coat is new and light blue, and she is holding a light-blue handbag.

After each toast, the guests casually throw ruble notes into a dish beside the musicians. Some throw green or blue notes; I even saw a few red tens. And all this at a time of what is being called "a reorganization of prices."[54] Such competitive generosity allows musicians to earn thousands of rubles. There have been articles in Yerevan newspapers about villagers falling deep into debt as a

result of these musical extravaganzas. The musicians try not to look at the growing pile of notes. But this isn't easy for them, and from time to time the flutes and the drum dart alert, lively glances at the precious dish.

A wedding feast clearly shows us the relationships between people, their professional and other hierarchies, their family ties.

There are men in their nineties, drinking and laughing like youngsters. They are from the village of Sasun, famous for its dancers and singers; they are descendants of David of Sasun.[55] There are peasants in soldiers' tunics, in jackets of all kinds; their wives are all wearing black calico. There are two district bosses, red-faced and confident, wearing suits from the Moscow Tailoring Combine;[56] their buxom wives are wearing identical bright-blue dresses. There are Yerevan dandies in drainpipe trousers and slim, fashionable young girls in coats of artificial fur; they too are from Yerevan, and they are students, postgraduates, and members of staff at scientific research institutes. There is an official from the Party Central Committee; he has broad shoulders and he wears a blue jacket and a red tie. There is Martirosyan, the famous Armenian writer, together with his wife. There are mechanics, drivers, tractor drivers, stonemasons, and carpenters from state farms; most of them are young and powerfully built.

All these people are closely and durably linked by ties of kinship and community. These ties are eternal; their strength has been tested over millennia. Not even the wrath of Stalin could destroy them.

The celebration was not free of anxiety and tension. The best man was constantly getting to his feet and crossly, almost rudely, demanding that the bride be allowed to leave the house and set off for the groom's village; she should have been there long ago. The bride's relatives would then shout angry retorts. To some extent, this dispute was part of the ritual. But everything was taking a lot longer than it should have, and so the best man—the commander in chief of the wedding—really did have something to be angry about.

Like the groom, the best man is wearing a broad red band on his sleeve. He has many difficult and complex responsibilities, and it is no wonder that he doesn't look much like a guest at a wedding. On his face lies an anxious frown, and he has the air of a factory director who is failing to fulfill the plan. He doesn't feel like joking. Only now and again does he remember the nature of the occasion. Then he smiles hurriedly, downs a glass—and returns to his duties.

"It's time now, it's time we were off!" he shouts and points at his watch. I've heard that he bought seventy kilos of chocolates for the wedding table, out of his own pocket. His full, swarthy face looks determined. It would clearly take a great deal to make him give way; he is a man who finishes what he has begun.

The wedding was so complex and polyphonic, so full of different people and voices, that the young couple in their new coats, the young man and woman who had decided to get married, seemed almost forgotten. Later in the day, when we had at last got back to the groom's village, I would feel this even more strongly.

But before this, when the bride began to say goodbye to her father's house, there were a few minutes when the sadness of the day became apparent to everyone. The bride was crying—and this was not part of the ritual. Her tears were tears of true feeling.

Everything at this point was deeply touching and full of meaning. The girl was leaving the poor home of her parents, and she was going to the poor home of the groom. I had seen her future home—a cramped little stone room with a low ceiling and one little window, on the side of a mountain. This was her lot, her fate, her entire life. Stone and more stone, day in, day out—and never a drop of rain.

And then the human soul, with all its agitation and sorrow, was again eclipsed by ritual. For some

time, the bride was not allowed to leave. The groom's agents and representatives had to bribe the young lads surrounding the young woman, who was still wearing her light-blue coat and white satin slippers and still clasping her light-blue bag. Then these young lads, closing their fists around three- and five-ruble notes—I even saw one with a ten-ruble note—moved aside and allowed the bride to make her way towards the glassy coach. How little this light-blue vision, with her pretty slippers and handbag—how little she had in common with the poor, harsh life that awaited her.

As a parting gift, her mother gave her a little white hen, a white dish, and a rosy red apple.

Meanwhile, to the thunder of drums and the piercing sound of the flutes, people began loading the dowry onto one of the trucks. The truck had stopped not directly outside the house but a little way off: Everyone, after all, had to admire the dowry.

Leading the procession were the old men, the tipsy ninety-year-olds; they were singing, jigging up and down, and on their heads they bore the bride's suitcases. Next came a group of strong young men, holding high in the air a table, a sewing machine, and a new wardrobe with mirror doors. Then came the women and children, carrying chairs. And then the orchestra thundered still louder: The best man and his friends were carrying a nickel-plated bed with a sprung mattress. The villagers' jokes must have been risqué; the male listeners laughed and shook their heads, while the women and girls looked down at the ground.

As the bride, surrounded by a crowd of women from the groom's party, walked up to the coach, a boy of about fifteen ran up to one of these women, hugged her and kissed her. Several men pounced on him furiously. In a moment the boy's face was covered with blood. I assumed that the boy was blind drunk, and I felt he had been punished much too harshly. Then I was told that this too was part of the ceremony—the boy was the bride's brother, and he had to kiss one of the women from the groom's village in revenge for their taking away his sister. It was a ritual, a tradition—though to me it seemed a coarse and brutal tradition.

But then I saw something deeply moving: Through her tear-stained eyes, the bride looked up at her brother, and at the very same moment, this boy with a bloody face and eyes wet with tears looked at his sister. Through their tear-stained eyes they smiled at each other, with a smile of love. My heart filled with joy, warmth, and sorrow.

Again we boarded our glassy coach. The bride and groom were sitting beside each other. They sat there like strangers, their faces frozen, not once even looking at each other, neither of them saying a single word during the entire journey.

The sun was now setting behind the stone bones of the mountains. Turbid, full of wan fire, this sun seemed to come from some abyss of geological time. A smoky red light bathed the mountain's red stone. At this moment, the biblical myth of Mount Ararat seemed entirely contemporary.

It was dark by the time we got back to the bridegroom's village. The stars were shining up above us—southern, Armenian stars, the stars that looked down long ago on high, snowy mountains that are now only fragments of impotent bone, the stars that shone above Mount Ararat before the Bible even existed, the stars that will still be shining when Ararat and Aragats, too, are no more than dead bones.

I remember this night clearly. We walked slowly through the village in the dark. In the middle of the street I glimpsed something white—a table covered by a white cloth. As we came up to this table, it was suddenly illuminated, from the roof of a house opposite, by car headlamps—the groom's uncle lived here and we had to sample the food and drink he had prepared for us. His sons were drivers and it was they who had installed the lamps. In the dazzling white light, we clinked glasses noisily, laughed, and wished the young couple happiness. Then, back in the deep-blue darkness, we walked down the village street to another white table; on this table the best man had had more food and drink

laid out for us.

Eventually, we entered the village club. It was a poor club in a poor mountain village, nothing like the glittering palaces of culture, built from pink tufa, in Hrazdan, in the region of Lake Sevan, and in the Ararat valley. It was simply a stone barrack with a dark timbered ceiling. There were two long rows of tables parallel to the walls, and sitting at these tables were around two hundred people. Here was none of the urban colorfulness I had seen in the home of the bride; here were only peasants.

In a whisper, my companions told me who everyone was: carpenters, shepherds, stonemasons, mothers who had given birth to ten or twelve children. I might have been at an embassy reception, with someone telling me about some figure in a red beret now talking to the Spanish ambassador.

The bride and groom were seated on chairs, while everyone else sat on boards laid on top of empty crates. But the bride and groom were not allowed to remain seated for long; during the toasts they had to stand, and the toasts were extremely long—not toasts but whole speeches. The young couple stood side by side—he in his checkered coat, checkered cap, and red armband, she still wearing her light-blue coat and clasping her light-blue handbag. He was looking sullenly straight in front of him, while she still stared down at the ground, her tear-stained eyes covered by her long lashes.

Everyone ate and drank a great deal. The room was full of steam and tobacco smoke. The general hubbub was getting louder and louder. This was true peasant merriment.

But every time some gray-bearded or black-mustached man stood up and began to speak, the whole of this large stone barn fell silent. The wedding guests knew how to listen. Martirosyan would whisper a commentary: “A brigade leader from a poultry farm. . . . In his ninety-second year. . . . A former head of the land department, an old Party member. He’s retired now, he lives in a village.”

The speakers said little about the newlyweds and their future happy life. They spoke instead about good and evil, about honorable labor, about the bitter fate of the Armenian nation, about the nation’s past and its hopes for the future, about the fertile Armenian lands to the west where so much innocent blood was spilt, about how the Armenian nation has been scattered throughout the world, about how labor and true kindness will always be stronger than any lie.

Everyone listened to these speeches in a kind of prayerful silence. There was no clinking of cutlery, no sound of drinking or chewing; everyone was listening attentively.

The former head of the land department said that he now reads the Bible and understands its wisdom. It was strange to hear this from an old Party member, but then—as he himself mentioned—he lived very close to Mount Ararat.

Then it was the turn of a thin gray-haired old man in an old soldier’s tunic. His dark face might have been carved from stone; rarely have I seen a face so severe. Martirosyan whispered to me, “He’s the collective-farm carpenter, and it’s you he’s addressing.”

There was something wonderful about the silence in the barn. Many pairs of eyes were looking at me. I did not understand the speaker’s words, but I was moved by the gentle, intent expression on the faces of the many people now looking at me. Martirosyan interpreted. The carpenter was talking about the Jews, saying that when he was taken prisoner during the war he had seen all the Jews being taken away somewhere separate. All his Jewish comrades had been killed. He spoke of the compassion and love he felt for the Jewish women and children who had perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. He said how he had read articles of mine about the war, with portrayals of Armenians, and had thought how this man writing about Armenians was from a nation that had also suffered a great deal. He hoped that it would not be long before a son of the much-suffering Armenian nation wrote about the Jews. To this he now raised his glass.

Everyone—both men and women—rose from their seats. Long, thunderous applause confirmed that the Armenian peasantry did indeed feel compassion for the Jewish nation.

Other people—old and young—got to their feet to address me. All spoke about the Jews and the Armenians, about how blood and suffering had brought them together.

I heard both old and young speak with respect for and admiration of the intelligence of the Jews and their love of labor. Old men repeated with conviction that the Jewish nation was a great nation.

I have more than once heard Russians—both intellectuals and simple people—speak with compassion of the horrors that befell the Jews during the Nazi occupation.

But I have also encountered the vicious mentality of the Black Hundreds.[57] I have felt this hatred on my own skin. From drunks on buses, from people eating in canteens or standing in queues, I have heard black words about the nation martyred by Hitler. And it has always pained me that our Soviet lecturers, propagandists, and ideological workers do not speak out against anti-Semitism—as did Korolenko, as did Gorky, as did Lenin.

Never in my life have I bowed to the ground; I have never prostrated myself before anyone. Now, however, I bow to the ground before the Armenian peasants who, during the merriment of a village wedding, spoke publicly about the agony of the Jewish nation under Hitler, about the death camps where Nazis murdered Jewish women and children. I bow to everyone who, silently, sadly, and solemnly, listened to these speeches. Their eyes and faces told me a great deal. I bow down in honor of their words about those who perished in clay ditches, earthen pits, and gas chambers, and on behalf of all those among the living in whose faces today's nationalists have contemptuously flung the words "It's a pity Hitler didn't finish off the lot of you."

To the end of my life I will remember the speeches I heard in this village club.

As for the wedding, it continued on its course.

Each of the guests was given a thin wax candle, and holding hands, we began to dance a slow and solemn round dance. Two hundred people—old men and old women, young boys and girls—all holding lighted candles, moved slowly and solemnly the length of the rough stone walls; the little lights swayed in their hands. I saw interlaced fingers; I saw a chain that would never rust or break—a chain of dark-brown laboring hands; I saw many little lights. It was a joy to look at people's faces: The soft sweet flames seemed to be coming not from the candles but from people's eyes. What kindness, purity, merriment, and sadness there was in these eyes. There were old men saying goodbye to a life now slipping away from them. There were old women in whose crafty eyes I saw a defiant joy. The faces of the young women were full of shy charm. There was a quiet seriousness in the eyes of the young boys and girls.

This chain, the life of the nation, was unbreakable. It brought together youth and maturity, and the sadness of those who would soon be leaving life. This chain seemed eternal; neither sorrow, nor death, nor invasions, nor slavery could break it.

The bride and groom were dancing. The groom's serious face with its large nose was directed straight ahead, as if he were driving a car; he wasn't even glancing at his young bride. Once or twice she lifted her eyelashes, and in the light of the wax candles I saw her eyes. I could see that she was afraid the wax might drip on her blue coat. I understood that all the wise speeches—speeches that had seemed to have so little to do with this wedding—did in fact have everything to do with this wedding and this young couple.

Though mountains be reduced to mere skeletons, may mankind endure forever.

Accept these lines from a translator from Armenian who knows no Armenian.

Probably I have said much that is clumsy and wrong. But all I have said, clumsy or not, I have said

with love.

Barev dzez—All good to you, Armenians and non-Armenians!

AN ARMENIAN PICTURE ALBUM

Grossman by a grave on the grounds of the monastery at Tsakhkadzor

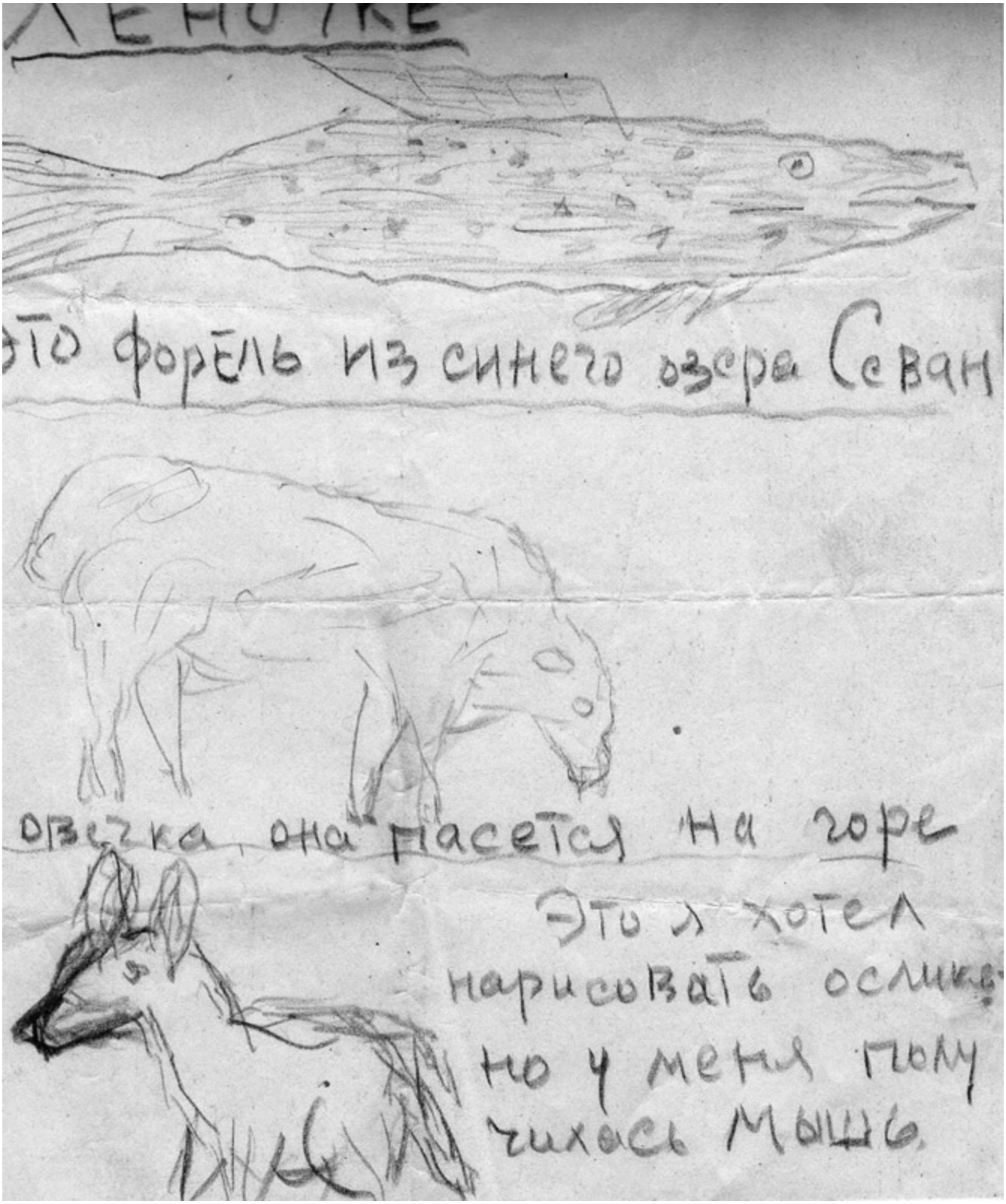
Grossman with children from the village of Tsakhkadzor

“And then the translator conversed with a mule and a sheep.” (See chapter 6.)

Grossman with men from the village of Tsakhkadzor

Grossman and “Hortensia” on the grounds of the monastery at Tsakhkadzor

Grossman and “Martirosyan” with Echmiadzin cathedral in the background



A drawing Grossman sent from Armenia to Lena, the daughter of his stepson, Fyodor Guber. The text reads as follows:

TO LENOCHKA.
This is a trout from blue Lake Sevan.
A sheep, it is grazing on the mountainside.
Here I wanted to draw a donkey, but it has ended up more like a mouse.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I AM ESPECIALLY grateful to Vasily Grossman's daughter, Yekaterina Korotkova, and his stepson, Fyodor Guber, both of whom have been patient and generous in answering questions. All unreferenced quotations or references to them are from personal correspondence. I also thank Fyodor Guber and his daughter Elena Fyodorovna Guber for allowing us to reproduce photographs from their fine collection.

It has been a joy, as always, to collaborate with my wife, Elizabeth, and with the Moscow scholar Yury Bit-Yunan.

I also wish to thank Michele Berdy, Olive Classe, Boris Dralyuk, David Fel′dman, John and Carol Garrard, Natalya Gonchar-Khandzhyan, Gasan Gusejnov, Alvard Jivanyan, Mark Miller, Francesca Ovi, Stephen Pearl, Anne Schumann, Gagik Stepan-Sarkissian, Polly Zavadivker, and the many members of my translation classes at Queen Mary, University of London and of the SEELANGS e-mail discussion group who have contributed to these translations.

R.C.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

alentin Kataev's *In the Country of Seven Springs* (1934) and Andrey Bitov's *The Lessons of Armenia* (written in 1969, five years after Grossman's death) also deserve mention.

pkin, *Kvadriga* (Moscow: Knizhny sad, 1997), 582.

ampolsky, "Poslednyaya vstrecha s Vasilyem Grossmanom," *Kontinent* 8 (1976): 147.

etter of January 3, 1962, published in *Glazami druzei*, an anthology of writings by Russians about Armenia (Yerevan: Ayastan, 1967), 360; see also letter of December 1, 1961, 356.

ee http://karabah88.ru/history/persony/89_meri_kochar-grossman_voshishalsia_kecharisom.html. In his memoir about Grossman, Lipkin claims that it was he who first proposed this task to Grossman. He reports Grossman as replying, "If the novel isn't vile, I'll translate it. It's a good thing that it is, as you say, a long book. I need the money, and I feel terrible. Maybe putting my nose to the grindstone will do me good." (*Kvadriga*, 593). Lipkin, however, is not always reliable; other parts of his account of Grossman and his Armenian memoir have been refuted by Natalya Gonchar-Khandzhyan in "K istorii publikatsii 'Dobro vam V. Grossmana,' " *Literaturnaya Armeniya* (1989): 2.

yodor Guber, *Pamyat' i pis'ma* (Probel, 2007), 109.

id., 600.

id., 603. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) is a science-fiction novel by H.G. Wells. Doctor Moreau is a physiologist who lives on a remote island, performing painful experiments on animals with the aim of transforming them into human beings. He has some success, but the objects of his experiments have an unfortunate tendency to revert to their animal form.

rossman's original subtitle was "Notes of an Elderly Man." The French translation is titled *La paix soit avec vous*. In English the memoir has often been referred to as *Good Wishes*, a title we considered for this edition but eventually rejected.

Lipkin, 603.

bid., 605.

Lev Slavin quotes parts of these passages in "Armenia! Armenia!," an article written in 1970 and now available at http://www.litmir.net/br/?*b* = 25070. They were first published in *Glazami druzei*, 354 and 355.

From "Never in my life have I bowed to the ground" to "the words 'It's a pity Hitler didn't finish off

the lot of you.'" The accounts of this episode by Lipkin and by Grossman's daughter, Yekaterina Korotkova, differ with regard to important details. Lipkin remembers Tvardovsky as having consistently stood by Grossman and interceded with the censor on his behalf; Korotkova remembers her father telling her in December 1962 that he had lost his temper with Tvardovsky and shown him the door when he insisted, after Grossman had already agreed to many cuts, on the need for still more. See John and Carol Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev* (The Free Press, 1996), 288.

Literaturnaya Armeniya 6 and 7 (1965). In 1967 it was republished both in Yerevan and in Moscow. In Yerevan it was included, along with Mandelstam's *Journey to Armenia*, in *Glazami druzei*, a collection of works about Armenia by Russian writers. In Moscow, it was included, with still more cuts, in a collection of Grossman's work titled *Dobro vam.*

The writer's real name was Gabrielyan, though he published under the pseudonym Hrachya Kochar. The translator's real name was Hasmik Taronyan; "Hasmik" is the Armenian for Jasmine. The real identities of these two figures would have been obvious to many people in Yerevan and it is unlike Grossman to be so disparaging towards people whose hospitality he had enjoyed. It is entirely possible that he cut these passages himself.

These remarks about the editing, and censorship, of Grossman's manuscript are largely drawn from the thoughtful discussion of these questions in Shimon Markish's preface to the French translation of *Dobro vam*, published as *La paix soit avec vous* (L'Age d'Homme, 2007); in this edition, every passage omitted from the 1965 publication of *Dobro vam* is italicized.

See "Armenia! Armenia!" Grossman himself tells the story of the old man addressing him in Armenian in *Glazami druzei*, 362.

AN ARMENIAN SKETCHBOOK

ergey Merkurov (1881–1952) was one of the most prominent Soviet sculptors and the creator of the three largest of the many Soviet monuments to Stalin. Of Greek-Armenian descent, he was a cousin of the spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff.

eld October 17 to 31, 1961. Among the matters discussed were the removal of Stalin's remains from the mausoleum on Red Square and the renaming of several towns and cities previously named after Stalin.

Soso," a diminutive of Joseph, was what Stalin's mother called him.

the beginning of 1962—soon after Grossman's visit—the statue of Stalin on the hill over Yerevan was finally taken down; it had been one of the last important Stalin monuments still standing. The roof of the World War II Victory Museum that had served as its podium then remained empty for five years. In 1967, another titanic statue, of Mother Armenia bearing a huge sword, took the place left empty by the Father of Peoples.

1915, the Ottoman government systematically exterminated the Armenian population of Asia Minor.

Between 1 and 1.5 million Armenians were killed.

ndranik Toros Ozanyan (1865–1927) was an Armenian general, political activist, and freedom fighter. He was so popular among his men that, even when he was promoted to the rank of general in the Imperial Russian Army, they continued to refer to him by his first name: "Andranik Pasha." During World War I, he helped organize Armenian battle units to fight alongside the Russians and against the Turks. In 1919, he emigrated to the United States, where Armenian émigrés referred to him as "the George Washington of the Armenians."

hroughout much of the Caucasus and Central Asia the suffix "aga" is used as an honorific; it is attached to the first name of any elder male judged worthy of respect.

c!

hese largely Armenian provinces were once part of the Ottoman Empire, though Kars was subsumed by the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth century. In 1920 the short-lived Armenian Republic fought a disastrous war against Turkey and was forced to cede the territory Armenians still think of as "Western Armenia."

The legendary hero of *The Daredevils of Sasun*, a medieval epic about the expulsion of Arab invaders.

Traditional candies popular throughout the Caucasus; nuts, and sometimes also raisins, are threaded onto a string, dipped in thickened fruit juice, dried, and wrapped in skin like a sausage.

The neoclassical architect Aleksandr Tamanyan (1878–1936) is remembered above all for his work in Yerevan.

Khachatur Abovyan (1809–1848), best known for his novel *Wounds of Armenia*, is seen as the father of modern Armenian literature. Stepan Georgievich Shaumyan (1878–1918) was an Armenian Bolshevik journalist, literary critic, and politician. Yeghishe Charents (1897–1937) was an Armenian poet and revolutionary who died in prison during Stalin's Great Terror. Anastas Mikoyan (1895–1978) held high office throughout most of the Soviet era under Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev.

van Paskevich (1782–1856) was an important general in the tsarist army. His successes as second in command, and then as commander in chief, of the Russian forces during the war with Persia (1826–1828) included the liberation of most of Armenia from Persian rule.

Grossman's interlocutor has confused him with the literary historian Leonid Grossman, who, in 1930, had published a fictional memoir in the voice of Olivier d'Archiac, Pushkin's second in his fatal duel.

Grossman is referring to *Life and Fate*.

Grossman studied chemistry at Moscow State University and always retained a deep interest in science. Here, uncharacteristically, he appears to have confused Thomas Edison, best known for his

invention of the electric light bulb, with Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone.

In December 1825 a group of liberal aristocrats staged an unsuccessful rebellion against Tsar Nicholas I.

The first great Russian comedy, by Aleksandr Griboyedov (1795–1829). It was rejected by the censors in Petersburg, and the performance in Yerevan was the only performance Griboyedov saw in his lifetime.

Mikael Nalbandian (1829–1866) was a utopian-socialist writer and philosopher. Arrested in 1862, he was imprisoned for several years in Petersburg and then exiled to Kamyshin, where he died of tuberculosis.

Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869–1923), a writer interested in folklore, is often seen as the Armenian national poet; in 1908 he was briefly imprisoned. Vladimir Korolenko (1853–1921) was a Ukrainian-Russian short-story writer and journalist. A fierce critic of the tsarist regime, he served two terms of exile, the second of them in Yakutia, in northeastern Siberia.

Prince Davit Guramishvili (1705–1792) was a Georgian poet forced to live much of his life outside Georgia. Grigory Savvich Skovoroda (1722–1794) was an important Ukrainian philosopher, poet, teacher, and composer. The Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) was exiled to the Kazakh coast of the Caspian Sea from 1847 to 1857. Most Soviet readers of Grossman's day would have known this.

The poet and novelist Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841).

Aleksandr Griboyedov: see note 19.

Vladimir Bogoraz-Tan (1865–1936) spent ten years in exile in Yakutia (1889–1899). There he studied the language, beliefs, and way of life of the Chukchi people. After publishing his materials some years later, he achieved worldwide renown. In 1917, he became a professor of ethnology at Petrograd University. Remaining in Leningrad during the 1920s and 1930s, he founded the Institute of the Peoples of the North and helped to create and teach written languages for indigenous Siberian peoples.

Prince Kropotkin (1842–1921) was a writer, scientist, and anarchist philosopher.

Nikolay Dobrolyubov (1836–1861) and Alexander Herzen (1812–1870) were radical thinkers and journalists; Nikolay Nekrasov (1821–1878) was a radical poet and the editor of an important literary journal.

Molokans are sectarian Christians who split from the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century. Their name, which means "milk drinkers," reflects the fact that, unlike the Orthodox, they drink milk on most of the two hundred or so fast days. In the late nineteenth century, there were about half a million Molokans within the Russian Empire, many of them exiled to Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Several hundred miles southeast of Kiev.

In 1833, a supposed outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon some Transcaucasian Molokans led to a schism between the Constants (the original Molokans) and a new, more zealous sect who referred to themselves as the New Israelites but were generally known as Jumpers and Leapers.

The original title of this novel is *Men Livet lever*, which could be translated as "But Life Lives." The title of the existing English translation is *The Road Leads On*.

The Komsomol is the Union of Communist Youth.

Martiros Saryan (1880–1972) is generally seen as Armenia's national artist. His early work was influenced by Gauguin and Matisse, and from 1926 to 1928 he lived and worked in Paris. A member of the Armenian Academy of Sciences from 1956, he was awarded the Order of Lenin three times.

Born in the city of Tula, Uspensky (1843–1902) was a prominent Russian writer and a member of the populist movement.

Nikolay Roerich (1874–1947) was a Russian painter and mystical philosopher, strongly influenced by theosophy.

A method promoted in one of the many "campaigns" instigated by Khrushchev.

Adolf Eichmann (1906–1962), the Nazi officer who was one of the main organizers of the Shoah, was tried in Jerusalem for war crimes in 1961. The trial lasted from April until December; Grossman would have been in Armenia as it was ending. Verkhoyansk, a town in eastern Siberia, is the coldest inhabited place on earth. Between 1860 and 1917 political exiles were often sent there.

One parsec is 3.26 light-years. Grossman's imagery here is strained, but he is evidently referring to the Byurakan Observatory on the slopes of Mount Aragats. Founded in 1946, this was one of the most important astronomical centers in the Soviet Union. Grossman's visit to Armenia was in 1961, the year when Yuri Gagarin's space flight focused Soviet attention on outer space as never before.

More Jews were shot at Domanevka than anywhere else in the Ukraine apart from Babi Yar on the outskirts of Kiev. The shooting was, in fact, carried out by Romanians, with little direct German involvement.

In most respects Grossman seems to have stayed close, in this memoir as in much of his fiction, to the factual truth. However, his daughter, Yekaterina Korotkova, has informed me (in an e-mail of August 8, 2012) that the true story of Grossman's aunt differs greatly from the version presented here. In reality, she was highly educated and the wife of a famous Kiev professor of medicine. Her first name was not Rakhil but Maria. The accounts of the deaths of her three children are also fictional. Grossman seems to have wished to emphasize not only her Jewishness but also the ordinariness, during these years, of what one might imagine to be an improbable intensity of tragedy. He also, no doubt, wanted to establish as strong as possible a contrast between the world-famous Gorky and this unknown "anchovy or sardine."

A woodwind instrument similar to an oboe and often played outdoors.

Sasha Chorny (1880–1932; real name: Alexander Mikhailovich Glickberg) was a popular poet, satirist, and children's writer.

From a famous poem written in 1837: "When the yellowing cornfield sways in the breeze."

In July 1841, Lermontov was killed in a duel at the foot of Mount Mashuk, in the Caucasus.

Grossman is quoting from Jeremiah 31:15; Rakhil is, of course, the same name as Rachel.

Aleksandr Vertinsky (1889–1957) emigrated after the Revolution but returned to the Soviet Union in 1943. He was always popular and even won a Stalin Prize as a film actor in 1951, but his first legal vinyl record was released in the Soviet Union only in 1969, twelve years after his death. Pyotr Leshchenko (1898–1954) was considered "the King of Russian Tango." He too emigrated, settling first in Paris and then in Romania. After 1945, he wanted to return to the Soviet Union; the Soviet authorities appear to have granted their permission, but he was then arrested and imprisoned in Romania.

The head of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The remnants of the fire temple were discovered in the 1950s, not long before Grossman's visit. It now seems probable that these remnants, rather than predating the first Christian cathedral, are from the second half of the fourth century, when much of Armenia was under Persian occupation and the cathedral was converted into a Zoroastrian temple.

Grossman seems to have forgotten that there is no image of Christ on the altar in Echmiadzin. The image on every Armenian altar—even when a church is dedicated to a particular saint—is invariably that of the Virgin and Child.

Intourist, founded in 1929, managed nearly all travel by foreign tourists within the Soviet Union. Volga cars, introduced in 1956, were a symbol of high status.

Grossman is alluding to Chekhov's story "The Privy Councillor."

Between the outer door of a Russian hut and the room or rooms where people ate, worked, and slept there was always an unheated entrance room. This provided insulation from the cold and could be used for storing tools and firewood or for housing animals.

Viktor Ambartsumyan (1908–1996) founded the Byurakan Observatory.

In 1961 the Soviet government redenominated all existing paper money. Old rubles were revalued at one-tenth of their face value; many people thus lost nine-tenths of their savings. Between 1961 and 1991 the official rate of exchange was one ruble to one pound sterling, though the black market rate was usually at least ten rubles to the pound. The series of new notes introduced in 1961 included three-ruble green notes and five-ruble blue notes.

See note 10.

Clothes produced by this factory were notoriously ugly.

One of several Russian ultranationalist and anti-Semitic organizations from the early twentieth century.

Further Reading

lrey Bitov, *Captive of the Caucasus*, trans. Susan Brownsberger (HarperCollins, 1993). This includes the memoir *Lessons of Armenia*.

mas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (OUP USA, 2010).

n and Carol Garrard, *The Life and Fate of Vasily Grossman* (Pen and Sword, 2012).

ily Grossman, *Everything Flows*, trans. Robert Chandler, Elizabeth Chandler, and Anna Aslanyan (NYRB Classics, 2009).

____, *Life and Fate*, trans. Robert Chandler (NYRB Classics, 2006).

____, *The Road*, ed. Robert Chandler, trans. Elizabeth Chandler, Robert Chandler, and Olga Mukovnikova (NYRB Classics, 2010).

____, *A Writer at War*, eds. and trans. Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (Pimlico, 2006).

p Mandelstam, *Journey to Armenia*, trans. Sidney Monas (Notting Hill Edition, 2011).

ip Marsden, *The Crossing Place: A Journey Among the Armenians* (Flamingo, 1994).